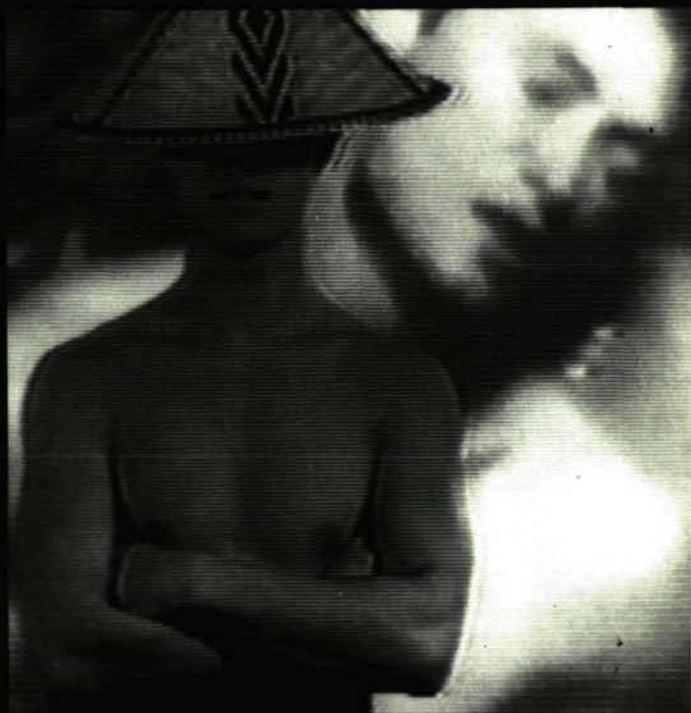


Screen



Video issue:

Richard Fung, autoethnography and hybridity

Bill Viola, *The Passing* and interpretation

Video poetics

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The autoethnographic performance: reading Richard Fung's queer hybridity

JOSÉ MUÑOZ

In the Caribbean we are all performers
Antonio Benítez-Rojo

The Queen's English, too: queer hybridity and the autoethnographic performance

Are Queens born or made? The royal visit sequence of Richard Fung's *My Mother's Place* (1991) undoes the 'either/or' bind that such a question produces. A sequence from the film's beginning narrates a moment when the pasty spectre of a monarch born to the throne helps to formulate an entirely different type of queen. A flickering sound and image connotes an 8mm camera, the technology used before the advent of amateur video cameras. A long black car leads a procession as school children, mostly black girls and boys wearing white or light blue uniforms, look on. At the centre of the procession we can easily identify the British Queen. The voiceover narration sets the scene:

Under the watchful eyes of the priests we stand for ages on the side walk, burning up in our school uniforms. Then quickly they pass, and all you see is a long white glove making a slow choppy motion. We wave the little flags we were given and fall back into class. White socks on our arms my sister and I practice the royal wave at home. After Trinidad and Tobago got our independence in 1962 Senghor, Salessi and Indira Ghandi also made visits. We were given

school holidays just like we got for the Queen and Princess Margaret, but my mother never took pictures of them.

The young Chinese Trinidadian's identification with the Queen is extremely complicated. Practicing the royal wave, in this instance, is an important example of a brand of dissidence that Homi Bhabha has defined as 'colonial mimicry'. 'mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus the sign of the double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the other as it visualizes power.'¹ The modalities of difference that inform this royal gesture are not only structured around the colonized/colonizer divide but also a gay/straight one. This moment of proto-drag 'flaunting' not only displays an ambivalence to empire and the protocols of colonial pedagogy, but also reacts against the forced gender prescriptions that such systems reproduce. This mode of mimicry is theatrical inasmuch as it mimes and renders hyperbolic the symbolic ritual that it is signifying upon. This brief 'visualization' of power is representative of Fung's cultural performance. Fung's video 'visualizes' the workings of power in ethnographic and pornographic films, two discourses that assign subjects like Fung, colonized, coloured and queer, the status of terminally 'other' object. Many of the performances that Fung produces are powerful disidentifications with these othering discourses.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recently defined the term 'queer' as a *practice* that develops for queer children as

the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [which] became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest these sites with fascination and love.²

Thus to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify; to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly 'line up'. This is equally true of hybridity, another modality where meaning or identifications do not properly line up. The postcolonial hybrid is a subject whose identity practices are structured around an ambivalent relationship to the signs of empire and the signs of the 'native', a subject who occupies a space between the West and the rest.

This is not to say that the terms 'hybridity' and 'queerness' are free of problems. In a recent article Ella Shohat attempts to temper the celebratory aura that currently envelops the word 'hybridity':

As a descriptive catch all term, 'hybridity' *per se* fails to discriminate between diverse modalities of hybridity, for example,

1 Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (New York and London Routledge 1993) p 86

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Tendencies* (Durham Duke University Press 1993), p 3

3 Ella Shohat 'Notes on the post-colonial' *Social Text*, nos 31/32 (1992), p 110

forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political co-optation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence.³

It would be dangerous to collapse together the different modalities of hybridity we encounter in the first world and its neocolonial territories, and in the various diasporas to which the diversity of ethnically-marked people belong. Queerness, too, has the capacity to flatten difference in the name of coalition. Scholars working with these anti-essentialist models of identity need to resist the urge to give in to crypto-essentialist understandings of these terms that eventually position them as universal identificatory sites of struggle. Despite some of the more problematic uses of the individual terms 'hybridity' and 'queerness', I take the risk of melding them when discussing the work of cultural producers like Fung because hybridity helps one understand how queer lives are fragmented into various identity bits: some of them adjacent, some of them complementary, some of them antagonistic. The hybrid – and terms that can be roughly theorized as equivalents, like the Creole or the Mestizo – are paradigms that help us account for the complexities and impossibilities of identity, but except for a certain degree of dependence on institutional frames, what a subject can do from her or his position of hybridity is, basically, open-ended. The important point here is that identity practices like queerness and hybridity are not *a priori* sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated. It is my understanding that these practices of identification inform the reflexivity of Fung's work.

The concept of hybridity has also been engaged by theorists outside of the field of postcolonial or critical race studies. Bruno Latour, the French philosopher of science, has recently put forth that the hybrid is a concept that must be understood as central to the story of modernity. Latour contends that the moderns, the denizens and builders of modernity, are known not for individual breakthroughs like the invention of humanism, the emergences of the sciences, the secularization and modernization of the world, but instead with the conjoined structure of these historical movements. Latour writes:

The essential point of the modern constitution is that it renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable. Does this lack of representation limit the work of mediation in any way? No, for the modern world would immediately cease to function. Like all other collectives it lives on that blending. On the contrary (and here the beauty of the mechanism comes to light), *the modern constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies.*⁴

4 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993), p 34

Latour's formulation explains the way in which modern culture produces hybrids while at the same time attempting to elide or erase

the representation or signs of hybridity. I want to suggest that Latour's formulation might also give us further insight into empire's panicked response to the hybrids it continuously produces. Empire's institutions, like colonial pedagogy, are in no small part responsible for the proliferation of hybrid identities, but it is in colonialism's very nature to delineate clearly between the West and the rest. Its terms do not allow for the inbetween status of hybridity. We might thus understand the work of hybrid cultural producers like Fung as a making visible of the mediations that attempt to render hybridity invisible and unthinkable: in both *My Mother's Place* and *Chinese Characters* (1986), Fung works to make hybridity and its process comprehensible and visible.

Fredric Jameson has recently contended that, 'The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination'.⁵ But some visuals are more pornographic than others. The epistemological affinity of ethnography and pornography has been explained in 'Ethnography, pornography and the discourses of power', Bill Nichols's, Christian Hansen's and Catherine Needham's mapping of various ways in which the two regimes of ethnography and pornography share a similar discourse of dominance.⁶ Both discourses are teleologically cognate insofar as they both strive for the achievement of epistemological utopias where the 'Other' and knowledge of the 'Other' can be mastered and contained. Ethnotopia can be characterized as a world of limitless observation, where 'we know them', while pornotopia is a world where 'we have them', 'a world of lust unlimited'.⁷ At the end of that essay the writers are unable to imagine a new symbolic regime or practice where these genres can be reformulated differently, in ways that actively attempt to avoid the imperialist or exploitative vicissitudes of these cinematic genres. My project here is to explicate the ways in which Richard Fung's work invites the viewer to push this imagining further. Fung challenges the formal protocols of such genres through the repetition and radical reinterpretation of such stock characters as the 'native informant'⁸ and the racialized body in porn. I will be considering two of Fung's videos, *My Mother's Place* and *Chinese Characters*. The former tape traces the Fung family's migratory history in the Asian diaspora through a series of interviews with Rita Fung, the artist's mother, while the latter considers the role of the eroticized Asian Other in the discourse of gay male pornography.

A consideration of the performativity of Fung's production sheds valuable light on his project. Reiteration and citation are the most easily identifiable characteristics of this mode of performativity. I will suggest that by its use of such strategies as voiceover monologues, found familial objects like home movie footage, and the technique of video keying, Fung's work deploys a practice of performativity that repeats and cites, *with a difference*, the generic fictions of the native Other in ethnography and the Asian 'bottom'⁹ in fetishizing, North

5 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1

6 This co-authored essay appears in Nichols' collection *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 201–28

7 For further discussion of 'Pornotopia' see Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989)

8 The idea of the 'native informant' has been discredited in contemporary anthropology and is now only written within scare quotes. The idea of indigenous people serving as informants to first world ethnographers has been critiqued throughout anthropology, critical theory and postcolonial studies

9 In contemporary queer culture, 'top' and 'bottom' are words used to describe people's sexual proclivities. Women or men who prefer to be penetrated in the economy of sexual acts are bottoms, while those whose identification is connected with acts of penetration are usually referred to as tops. The words 'top' and 'bottom' do not capture the totality of one's sexual disposition but instead work as a sort of cultural shorthand. Asian gay men, as I will explain later in this article, are stereotypically labeled as strictly bottoms in the erotic image hierarchy of North American gay porn

American, specialty porn. The definition of 'performative' I am producing is not meant as an overarching one, but as a working definition designed to deal with the specificity of Fung's productions. This operative understanding of performativity is informed, to some degree, by the work of Judith Butler in her most recent book *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Butler explains that if a performative succeeds,

that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. What this means then, is that a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized.¹⁰

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 226–7

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffery Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) p. 18

¹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 245

¹³ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender and Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989) pp. 99–100

In this quotation Butler is answering a rhetorical question put forward by Jacques Derrida when he considers whether or not a performative would work if it did not 'repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance . . . if it were not identifiable in some way as a "citation"?'¹¹ Butler, in her analysis, is in agreement with Derrida as she understands a performative as working only if it taps into the force of its site of citation, the original that is being repeated, while it draws on and, in time, covers the conventions that it will ultimately undermine. While Butler's essay is concerned specifically with the performative charge of queerness, its ability to redo and challenge the conventions of heterosexual normativity, it can also explicate the workings of *various* 'minority' identifications. Homi Bhabha defines the power of performance in the postcolonial world as the ' "sign of the present" ' the performativity of discursive practice, the *recits* of the everyday, the repetition of the empirical, the ethics of self enactment'.¹² The repetition of the quotidian in Bhabha, like citation and repetition in Butler, elucidates Fung's own ethics of self-enactment.

Fung's performances work as 'autoethnography', inserting a subjective, performative, often combative, 'native I' into ethnographic film's detached discourse and gay male pornography's colonizing use of the Asian male body. I will be suggesting that through acts like postcolonial mimicry and the emergence of a hybridized and queerly reflexive performance practice, the social and symbolic economy that regulates otherness can be offset.

The movement of personal histories into a public sphere is typical of autoethnography. Françoise Lionnet describes the way in which autoethnography functions in written cultural production as '[a] scepticism about writing the self, the auto-biography, turning it into the allegory of the ethnographic project that self consciously moves from the general to the particular to the general'.¹³ These movements from general to specific, and various shades inbetween, punctuate Fung's work. Lionnet, in her study of folk anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, conceives of autoethnography as a mode of cultural performance. She explains that autoethnography is a 'text/

14 Ibid p 102

15 This phrase is developed in the work of Michel Serres, *The Parasite* trans Lawrence R Schehr (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press 1982) p 6

16 Mary Louise Pratt *Under Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York and London Routledge 1992) pp 6–7

17 Jim Lane has recently argued for the utility of literary theories of autobiography when considering the historical and theoretical underpinnings of autobiographical film. Lane's article also provides a good gloss of the autobiographical film after 1968. See Notes on theory and the autobiographical documentary film in America *Wide Angle* vol 15, no 3 (1993) pp 21–36

performance' and 'transcends pedestrian notions of referentiality, for the staging of the event is part of the process of "passing on", elaborating cultural forms, which are not static and inviolable but dynamically involved in the creation of culture itself'.¹⁴ The creation of culture in this style of performance is always already braided to the production of self in autoethnography insofar as culture itself is the field in which this 'figural anthropology' of the self comes to pass.¹⁵

Mary Louise Pratt has also recently employed the term 'autoethnography' in her study of travel writing on the imperial frontier. In this study, Pratt lucidly outlines the differences between ethnography and autoethnography:

I use these terms [autoethnography and autoethnographic expression] to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways which engage with the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means in which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.¹⁶

Conventional video and documentary style can, in the case of Fung and in the light of Pratt's definition, be understood as the 'colonizer's terms' that are being used to address the metropolitan form. But in Fung's case these terms work to address more than just the metropolitan form and the colonizer. The terms are also meant to speak to the colonized in a voice that is doubly authorized, both by the metropolitan form and subaltern speech. I am not proposing an explanation where form and content are disentangled. More accurately, I mean to imply the metropolitan form is inflected by the power of subaltern speech and the same is equally true in reverse. Fung's cultural work elucidates a certain imbrication – that the metropolitan form needs the colonial 'other' to function. Autoethnography is a strategy that seeks to disrupt the hierarchical economy of colonial images and representations by making visible the presence of subaltern energies and urgencies *in* metropolitan culture. Autoethnography worries easy binarisms like colonized and the colonizer or subaltern and metropolitan by presenting subaltern speech through the channels and pathways of metropolitan representational systems.

Lionnet's and Pratt's theorizations are useful tools in understanding the tradition of autobiographical film that has flourished in North America since 1968.¹⁷ The practice of combining evidentiary sound/image cinema with narratives of personal history has been especially prevalent in video documentary production since the advent of widespread independent video production in the late 1960s. Video technology provided disenfranchised sectors of the public sphere with inexpensive and mobile means to produce alternative media. Video documentary practices were adopted by many different minority communities that we might understand as counter-publics. Native

Americans, African-Americans, Asians, Latina/os, feminists, gays and lesbians all made considerable contributions to the field of documentary video. In the 1980s, AIDS/HIV activist groups like ACT-UP made use of this technology and the practices of documentary in politically adroit ways.¹⁸

We might consider this modality as an intensification of what Jim Lane has called the 'personal as political trend' in post 1960s autobiographical film.¹⁹ Lane registers a diminishing production of overtly political cinema in the face of what he understands as the more privatized identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Such a dichotomy would be of little use when considering trends in video production, a medium which has always found political relevance precisely in the politics of identity and different minority communities.

This strain of autobiographical documentary is best illustrated in recent work by numerous queer video artists. Fung's practice shares an autoethnographic impulse with the work of Sadie Benning and the late Marlon Riggs, to identify only two examples from a larger field. Riggs excavated an African-American gay male image that has been elided in the history of both black communities and queer communities.²⁰ Benning's confessional experimental videos produce an interesting ethnography of white queer youth culture.²¹ In both these examples the artists inhabit their videos as subjects who articulate their cultural location through their own subcultural performances as others: poetic teen angst monologues in the case of Benning, and from Riggs, vibrant snap diva virtuosity that includes, but is not limited to, dance, music and monologues.

This queer trend that I am identifying is in many ways an effort to reclaim the past and put it in direct relationship with the present. Autoethnography is not interested in searching for some lost and essential experience, because it understands the relationship that subjects have with their own pasts as complicated yet necessary fictions. Stuart Hall provides a formulation that addresses this complicated relationship between one's identity and one's past:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they [identities] are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways in which we are positioned by, and position our selves within, narratives of the past.²²

A subject is not locating her or his essential history by researching a racial or cultural past; what is to be located is in fact just one more identity bit that constitutes the matrix which is hybridity.

This relationship between a past and present identity is articulated through a voiceover near the end of *My Mother's Place*, when Fung explains that his mother: 'connects me to a past I would have no other

18 For a historical overview of documentary video see Deirdre Boyle, 'A brief history of American documentary video' in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, (eds), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture Bay Area Video Coalition 1990), pp 51–70. Boyle's most significant elision in the summary is the omission of gay, lesbian, queer and HIV/AIDS activist video documentary.

19 Lane, 'Notes on theory'.

20 See Marcos Becquer, 'Snap!thology and other discursive practices in *Tongues Untied*', *Wide Angle*, vol. 13, no. 2, (1991) for a fine reading of Riggs' black and queer performance and production.

21 Chris Holmlund has recently discussed Benning's videos as autoethnographies: 'When autobiography meets ethnography and girl meets girl: the "Dyke Docs" of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich', unpublished manuscript, presented at Visible Evidence, Duke University, September 1993.

22 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural identity and cinematic representations' in Mbye Cham (ed.), *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press Inc., 1992), p. 133.

way of knowing. And in this sea of whiteness, of friends, enemies and strangers, I look at her and know who I am.' The past that Rita makes available to Richard is not an essentialized racial past but instead a necessary fiction of the past that grounds the video artist in the present.

Fung's relationship with and love for his mother are at the centre of *My Mother's Place*. The video paints an endearing portrait of Rita Fung as a woman who came of age during colonialism and took her identifications with the colonial paradigm with her to the moment of decolonization. It is shot in Canada and Trinidad and is composed of a series of 'interviews' and recollections that form a decidedly personal register. This video portrait of his mother is a queer son's attempt to



My Mother's Place (Richard Fung, 1991)

reconstruct and better understand his identity formation through equally powerful identifications, counter-identifications and disidentifications with his mother and her own unique relationship to the signs of colonization. The tape relies on its documentary subject's ability to tell her own story in a witty and captivating fashion.

The opening of *My Mother's Place* includes a section subtitled 'Reading instructions'. This depicts a sequence of women, mostly academics and activists, mostly women of colour, sitting in a chair in front of a black background on which photographs of different women's faces are projected. After the women pronounce on various critical issues including imperialism, gender, political action and exile, the screen is filled with captions that loosely define the cluster of talking heads on the screen. The descriptions include: teacher, writer, sociologist, arts administrator, feminist, poet, Jamaican, English, Indian, friends. The visual text is accompanied by Fung's voiceover saying 'these women have never met my mother'. This 'not lining-up' of sound and image is not meant to undermine any of the women's interviews. More nearly it speaks to the ways in which identification with neither his mother nor with his academic friends and colleagues suffices. This moment where things do not line up is a moment of reflexivity that is informed by and through the process of queerness and hybridity. It is a moment where hybridity is not a fixed positionality but a survival strategy that is essential for both queers and postcolonial subjects who are subject to the violence that institutional structures reproduce.

This scepticism and ambivalence which Lionnet identifies as being characteristic of autoethnography can be located throughout Fung's project. Fung employs various tactics to complicate and undermine his own discourse. During a sequence towards the middle of the video the artist once again employs home movie footage. The 8mm home video instantly achieves a texture reminiscent of childhood. In viewing the section from the tape the spectator becomes aware of the ways in which the videomaker supplies contradictory information on three different levels: the visual image, the voiceover and the written text which appears on the screen. The visual image shows a young Rita Fung strolling the garden in her 1950s-style *Good Housekeeping* dress and red pillbox hat. She does not look directly at the camera. Her stride is calm and relaxed. There is a cut and Rita Fung reappears, her back to the camera as she walks off, holding the hand of a little boy. The little boy is wearing a white button-down oxford and black slacks. He holds on tightly to his mother's hand. The next cut shows both mother and son smiling and walking towards the camera. This is the first view the spectator has of the narrator. The voiceover scene matches the image by narrating a family history:

It's Sunday after Mass. Dressed in satin, she looks like the woman in the *Good Housekeeping* magazine that arrives from the States.

During the week she is off to work while I go to school. She wears a pencil behind her right ear and her desk is near the Coke machine. When she is not at the shop she is washing clothes, cooking, sitting on a box in the garden, cutters in hand, weeding. In the evening she is making poppy sauce or making cookies to sell. We dropped six cookies at a time in a plastic bag while we watched *Gunsmoke* on TV. When I bring home forms from school she puts 'housewife' down as occupation. The women in *Good Housekeeping* are housewives. In the afternoon they wait at home to serve cookies and milk to their children. Mom was never home when I got home from school.

When this segment of narration concludes, the flickering sound of home projector fades and is replaced by the film's nondiegetic score. Text appears over the image of young Richard and Rita Fung. It reads: 'These pictures show more about my family's desire than how we actually lived'. The voiceover narration then continues: 'But in all the family pictures this is the only shot that shows what I remember'. The image that follows this statement is of a young Richard wearing shorts and T-shirt, still holding onto his mother's hand as they both dance. A new title is superimposed over the image and this text responds to the last bit of narration by explaining: 'We're doing the twist'. The next image shows an uncoordinated little Richard dancing and jumping barefoot in his backyard. He looks directly at the camera and sticks his tongue out. His manner is wild and effeminate. The narrator then introduces the last instalment of text in this segment by saying: 'And me, well you can see from these pictures that I was just an ordinary boy doing ordinary boy things'. The screen is then once again covered with text. The story superimposed over the image is one that is familiar to many children who showed cross-dressing tendencies in early childhood:

One day Mom caught me in one of her dresses and threatened to put me out in the street. . . . I was scared but it didn't stop me.

When Fung betrays the visual image as a totally imaginary ideal that was more about his parents' fantasy life than about what really happened he is disavowing the colonial fantasy of assimilation that his family's home movies articulated. In this scene, and throughout *My Mother's Place*, the 'Queen's English' is spoken by a mimic man, a subject who has interpolated the mark of colonial power into his discourse but through repetition is able to disarticulate these traditional discourses of authority. The term coined by Bhabha to describe the condition of the colonized subject, 'not quite/not white', aptly depicts the overall effect of the 'all-American' home movie footage. The statements disseminated through the visual text are directly connected with Fung's then proto-queer identity as an effeminate boy, the type of queer child which Sedgwick describes as a subject for whom meaning

does not neatly line up. He was not, as his voiceover suggested, 'an ordinary boy doing ordinary boy things', he was, in fact, a wonderfully swishy little boy who, among other things, liked to dress in his mother's *Good Housekeeping* style dresses, liked the fictional moms on television who baked cookies for their children. I would also suggest that we might understand the actual storytelling practice of the film, the not-lining-up of image, sound and text, as something that is decidedly queer about Fung's production. This not-lining-up of image and sound is a deviation from traditional documentary, which is chiefly concerned with sound and image marching together as a tool of authorization. The not-lining-up strategy was employed in different ways in Fung's earlier videotape *Chinese Characters*, achieving similar disidentificatory effects. While the two tapes deal with vastly different subjects they nonetheless, on the level of process and practice, share significant strategical manoeuvres that once again are indebted to a predominantly queer wave in documentary production.

Transfiguring the pornographic

The reassertions of agency that Fung displays in *My Mother's Place*, the way in which he asserts the natives' authority in the ethnographic project, are not entirely different from those that are achieved in *Chinese Characters*. This videotape performs an intervention in the field of mainstream pornography by adding an Asian male *presence* where it has routinely been excluded. This experimental documentary interviews gay Asian men about their relationships to pornography. The documentary subjects reflect upon the way in which pornography helped mould them as desiring subjects. The tape also includes a narrative sequence in which a young Asian man penetrates the white gay male field of pornography by being video-keyed into an early porn loop

The mainstream gay pornography that has dominated the market, produced by California-based companies like Catalina, Falcon and Vivid Video, has contributed to a somewhat standardized image of the porn performer. It is paradoxical that the promise of pornotopia, the promise of lust *unlimited*, desire without restriction, is performed by a model who generally conforms to a certain rigid set of physical and racial characteristics. This standardized porn model is a paler shade of white, hairless, and he is usually young and muscled. He is the blueprint that is later visualized infinitely at gay male identity hubs like gyms and dance clubs. The mainstream porn image, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, continued to evolve into an all too familiar clean-shaven Anglo twenty-something clone. Whilst the pornography with which Fung interacts in his interventionist video performances is not quite as homogenized as today's pornography, the porn loops he riffs upon still display the trace of this white normative

sex clone. The point here is not to moralize upon how such an image might be harmful, since it is my belief that it is a futile project to deliberate on the negativity or positivity of images within representational fields.²³ Instead, it is far more useful to note the ways in which Fung transfigures porn through his practices. His video production illuminates the normative logics of porn productions by deploying, through an act of postcolonial mimicry, a disidentification with a popularized ideal: the Asian gay male body. Fung's disidentification with the generic and racially inflected protocols of porn opens up a space that breaks down the coherence of white domination in the gay male erotic imaginary. This disidentification accesses possibilities, through the unlikely vehicle of the Orientalized body, that are ultimately sex and pornography positive, but nonetheless rooted in a struggle to free up the ethnocentric conceit that dominates the category of the erotic in the pornographic imaginary. By 'ethnocentric conceit' I mean the troubling propensity of representing standardized white male beauty as a norm, and the tendency in erotic representation to figure non-white men as exotic kink.

It is important to note here the powerful connection between gay male porn and gay male culture. Richard Dyer, in an often-cited essay on gay male pornographic production, has pointed out that gay male pornography is analogous to gay male sexuality in more general terms.²⁴ Understanding pornography as an analogue to broader aspects of gay male culture makes even more sense today, as pornography, during this second decade of the AIDS pandemic, is one of the only completely safe and sex-positive, identity-affirming spaces/practices left to gay men. Fung's critique of porn, or the one that is being offered here, should not be understood as antipornographic; rather, by unveiling the ethnocentric bias at work in the pornographic imaginary that is collectively produced by the porn industry, we can better understand the larger problem of white normativity and racism within North American gay male culture.

In her essay 'The she-man: postmodern bi-sexed performance in film and video', Chris Straayer has recently described the process of this reenacting of historically denied agency in Fung's work. She explains that, 'Fung uses technology to intervene in conventional positioning. First he video-keys himself into a pornographic film where he then poses as the lure for a desiring "stud"'.²⁵ Straayer's description is evocative of the way in which the terrain of pornography becomes a contact zone,²⁶ one in which the ideological (visualized in Fung's technological reinsertion into the representational field) and the epistemological (pornography's need to carnally know the Other) collide.

The ideological effect I am referring to is visible in a scene from *Chinese Characters* where an actual Chinese character is video-keyed into an exclusively white gay male porn film. The Asian male body,

²³ Michelle Wallace has argued forcefully against the trend to produce negative/positive critiques in critical race theory in her book *Invisibility Blues: from Pop to Theory* (New York and London: Verso, 1990), pp. 1–13.

²⁴ Richard Dyer, 'Male gay porn coming to terms' *Jump Cut* no. 30, (1985), pp. 27–9.

²⁵ Chris Straayer 'The she-man: postmodern bi-sexed performance in film and video' in *Screen* vol. 31 no. 3 (1990) p. 272.

²⁶ The term 'contact zone' is borrowed from Pratt's study, *Under Imperial Eyes* pp. 6–7.

after being keyed into the grainy seventies porn loop, proceeds to take what seems like a leisurely stroll in an outdoor sex scene. The act of taking a leisurely walk is designed to connote casual tourism. The touristic pose taken here is quite different from the usual options available to gay men of colour in the pornography industry. This performatively reappropriates the position of the white male subject who can touristically gaze at minority bodies in such tapes as *Orient Express* (1990), *Latin from Manhattan* (1992) or *Blackshaft* (1993).²⁷ The newly subjectivized Other who has been walking through this scene then comes face to face with a character from this porn loop. The white male reaches out to the Asian male who, by the particular generic protocols of this vanilla porn subgenre, would be excluded from that symbolic field. Donning a 'traditional' dome-shaped Asian field worker's hat, the Asian male subject plays with his own nipples as he then materializes in a California poolside orgy. Such a performance of autoeroticism, within a symbolic field like the 1970s white male porn loop, realigns and disrupts the dominant stereotype insofar as it portrays the Asian male body not as the perpetually passive bottom who depends on the white male top, but instead as a subject who can enjoy scopic pleasure in white objects while at the same time producing his own pleasure.

Fung later, in a print essay, deals with the marginal genre of interracial porn, especially tapes featuring Asian men.²⁸ In this essay Fung explains that the Asian male body in interracial videotapes is almost always cast as the passive bottom who depends on the white male top to get off. I find it significant that this inquiry into interracial porn follows an initial engagement with porn's exclusionary and racially biased image hierarchy (the critique that *Chinese Characters* produces). Within the logic of porn, a subfield like racially integrated or exclusively non-white tapes are roughly equivalent to other modalities of kink like bondage, sadomasochism, shaving, and so on. The point here is that, due to white normativity of the pornotopic field, race *counts* as a different sexual practice (that is, doing sadomasochism, doing Asians). Thus race, like sadomasochism, is essentially a performance. An observation of Fung's practices reveals that the Asian men in his tapes essentially repeat Orientalized performances with a difference through the video insertions and interviews they perform in the tape.

Chinese Characters narrates another cultural collision through different representational strategies. What seems like a traditional Chinese folk tale is first heard as the camera lyrically surveys what appears to be a Chinese garden. When the visual image abruptly cuts to a full body shot of an Asian man trying on different outfits, the nondiegetic 'traditional' Chinese music is replaced by a disco soundtrack that signifies one has entered a gay male subculture. For a brief period we continue to hear the folk tale with the disco soundtrack. When the folk tale expires we hear the soundtrack of a

²⁷ This tradition of white male spectators, firmly positioned in a superior hierarchical position dates back to the very first photographic male pornography. A recent article on six gay male pornographic photographs, retrieved from the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex Gender and Reproduction, identifies an Orientalist motif in the images of two men with turbans and 'Oriental' robes, having oral and anal sex in front of the artificial backdrop of exoticized palm trees. The article's author argues that Orientalism has long occupied an important position in gay male pornography. Todd D. Smith, 'Gay male pornography and the east: re-orienting the Orient', *History of Photography* vol. 18, no. 1 (1994).

²⁸ See Fung. Looking for my penis the eroticized Asian in gay video porn. In *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) pp. 145–60. In this essay Fung explains an orientalism that Edward Said's seminal study could not imagine. Fung surveys the different racist constructions of Asian men that dominate gay male pornography and tentatively imagines a pornography that affirms rather than appropriates Asian male sexuality.

porn trailer that announces the name of recognizable white porn performers/icons, like Al Parker. The announcer's voice produces a typical raunchy rap that eventually fades as a techno-disco beat rises in volume. The Asian man finally chooses his outfit and commences his cruise. The filaments of the artist's hybridized identity, in this brief sequence, are embodied in sound and performance. The gay man's body literally bridges these different sound messages: traditional Chinese music, the heavy accent of a Chinese-American retelling what seems to be an ancient fable, the voice of the white porn announcer as he describes the hot action, and the techno-beat that eventually emerges as the score for the gay man's cruise. On the level of the visual, the fact that the subject is dressing during the scene identifies it as a moment of queer hybrid self-fashioning. Both the performances of drag and striptease are signified upon during this sequence. Rather than taking off his clothing, as in the traditional striptease, the process of revealing an 'authentic' self, the Asian male about to commence his cruise continuously dresses and redresses, enacting a kind of counter-striptease that does not fetishize a material body but instead mediates on the ways in which, through costume and performance, one continuously *makes* self. Each outfit that is tried on displays a different modality of being queer; all the ensembles depict different positions on a gay male subcultural spectrum. All of it is disguise and the sequence itself works as a catalogue of various queer modalities of self-presentation.

Of these different disguises, the Orientalized body is one of the most important. Fung's critique is not simply aimed at the exclusion of Asians from pornographic video and, in turn, other aspects of a modern gay lifeworld. It is also, through a mode of mimicry that I understand as disidentificatory, a challenge to the limited and racist understandings of the gay male body in pornography. Orientalism is a powerful critical term first coined by Edward Said in his influential study of that name. There Said described Orientalism as 'a style of thought that is based on an ontological and epistemological division made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"'.²⁹ The totalizing implications of Said's theory have, over the last decade, been critiqued by many scholars. Bhabha, in perhaps the most famous of these challenges to Said's analysis of Orientalism, points to the ambivalence of power in colonial discourse, arguing that Said's narrative of Orientalism posited all agency and power on the side of the 'Occident', ignoring the ways in which the colonized might gain access to power and enact self against and within the colonial paradigm.³⁰ Recently, Lisa Lowe has made a significant contribution to the development of the theoretical discourse on Orientalism by further describing the phenomenon with a special attention to its nuanced workings:

I do not construct a master narrative or a singular history of

²⁹ Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 2–3.

³⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The other question: the stereotype of colonial discourse', *Screen* vol. 24, no. 6 (1983) reprinted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. A recent article by Tom Hastings offers the most interesting and sustained critique of the heterosexist blindspots in Said's study 'Said's Orientalism and the discourse of (hetero)sexuality', *Canadian Review of American Studies* vol. 23 no. 1 (1992), p. 130.

31 Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains
French and British Orientalisms*
(Ithaca and London: Cornell
University Press 1991), p. 5

orientalism, whether of influence or of comparison. Rather, I argue for a conception of orientalism as heterogeneous and contradictory; to this end I observe, on the one hand, that orientalisms consist of uneven orientalist situations across different cultural and historical sites, and on the other, that each of these orientalisms is internally complex and unstable. My textual readings give particular attention to those junctures at which narratives of gendered, racial, national and class differences complicate and interrupt the narrative of orientalism, as well as to the points at which orientalism is refunctioned and rearticulated against itself.³¹

Fung's engagement with Orientalism can be understood to operate in a similar way to Lowe's. Orientalism in *Chinese Characters*, like the signs of colonial power in *My Mother's Place*, are refunctioned by Fung's disidentification with these cultural referents. Disidentification is the performative re-citation of the stereotypical Asian bottom in porn, and the trappings of colonial culture. In this instance, we have a useful example of the way in which disidentification engages and recycles popular forms with a difference. Fung's strategy of disidentification reappropriates an ambivalent yet highly charged set of images – those representing the queer Asian body in porn – and remakes them in a fashion that explores and outlines the critical ambivalences that make this image a vexing site of identification and desire for Asian gay men and other spectators/consumers with antiracist political positions. The erotic is not demonized but instead used as a site for critical engagement. Documentary, in the case of Fung's production, is reflexive practice inasmuch as it aims to rearticulate dominant culture and document a history of the other, an orientalized other that remakes otherness as a strategy of enacting the self that is undermined and limited by orientalist and colonialist discourses.

Finding Fung

Specific scenes, postcolonial or decolonized spaces like Fung's Trinidad or the Asian community in Toronto, enable these sorts of rearticulations by functioning as contact zones, locations of hybridity that, because their location is liminal, allow for new social formations that are not as easily available at empire's centre.

The Caribbean basin is an appropriate setting for *My Mother's Place* in that it is a 'contact zone', a space where the echoes of colonial encounters still echo in the contemporary sound produced by the historically and culturally disjunctive situation of temporal and spatial copresence that is understood as the postcolonial moment.

Pratt elaborates one of the most well-developed theories of contact

zones For Pratt, the 'contact' component of contact zone is defined as a perspective:

A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees', not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.³²

For Pratt, a contact zone is both a location and a different path to thinking about asymmetries of power and the workings of the colonizer/colonized mechanism. Both videotapes I have analysed in this essay, stage copresences which are essentially instances of contact: the contact between a colonized queer boy (and his mother) with the signs of empire and imperialism like the Queen, *Good Housekeeping* magazine and *Gunsmoke in My Mother's Place*, and, in the case of *Chinese Characters*, the contact between the Asian male body in pornotopia and the whiteness of the industry that either relegates him to the status of perpetual bottom or excludes him altogether.

It would also be important to situate the artist's own geography in this study of contact zones. Fung's Trinidad is considered a contact zone par excellence in part because its colonial struggle has been well documented by postcolonial thinkers like C.L.R. James who have written famous accounts of the island's history of colonization.³³ Fung's status as Asian in a primarily black and white colonial situation further contributes to Fung's postcolonial identity. An Asian in such a setting, like an Asian in the already subcultural field of (white-dominated) gay male culture, is at least doubly a minority and doubly fragmented from the vantage point of dominant culture. Canada, on the other hand, has not received extensive consideration as a postcolonial space.³⁴ A settler colony, Canada's status as not quite first world and not quite second world positions it as a somewhat ambiguous postcolonial site. Canada, for example, is an importer of US pornography. It is therefore, on the level of the erotic imaginary, colonized by a US erotic image hierarchy.³⁵ I want to suggest that the geographical location of Fung's production is significant when considering the hybridity of his representational strategies. Fung's *place*, in both Canada, Trinidad, gay male culture, documentary practice, ethnography, pornography, the Caribbean and Asian diasporas, is not quite fixed, thus this work is uniquely concentrated on issues of place and displacement.

Furthermore, these zones are all productive spaces of hybridization where complex and ambivalent *American* identities are produced. The process by which these hybrid identity practices are manufactured is one that we can understand as syncretism. Many Latin American and US Latino critics have used the term not only to explicate a complex

³² Pratt *Under Imperial Eyes* p. 7

³³ See for example, C.L.R. James *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Stanley Paul and Co., 1963)

³⁴ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge touch upon Canada's ambiguous postcolonial status in their co-authored essay 'What is post(-)colonialism?', *Textual Practices*, vol. 15 no. 3 (1991) pp. 339–414. Canada is also covered in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's important primer *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

³⁵ The colonization of Canada as 'French-Other' Québec by a decidedly North American (here meant to include Anglo-Canadian and mainstream US) culture has been touched upon by Robert Schwartzwald in his essay 'Fear of federalism: Québec's inverted fictions', in Hortense Spillers (ed.) *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 181. Fung's Asian queer community can be understood as another 'Other-Canada' that experiences a cultural colonization under the sign of North America.

system of cultural expressions but also to describe the general character of the Caribbean. The Cuban theorist of postmodernism, Antonio Benítez-Rojo uses the term supersyncretism, which for him arises from the collision of European, African and Asian components within the plantation. For Benítez-Rojo the phenomenon of supersyncretism is at its most visible when one considers performance:

If I were to have to put it in a word I would say performance. But performance not only in terms of scenic interpretation but also in terms of the execution of a ritual. That is the 'certain way' in which two Negro women who conjured away the apocalypse were walking. In this 'certain kind of way' there is expressed the mystic or magical (if you like) loam of civilizations that contributed to the formation of Caribbean culture.³⁶

³⁶ Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: the Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 11

Benítez-Rojo's description is disturbing insofar as it reproduces its own form of Orientalism by fetishizing the conjuring culture of Cuban Santería and its mostly black and often female practitioners in a passing lyrical mention. There is, nonetheless, a useful refunctioning of this formulation. Instead of Benítez-Rojo's example I want to consider the acts that Fung narrates: the way in which a proto-queer Chinese Trinidadian boy with a sock on his hand mimics the Queen's wave, a gesture that is quite literally the hailing call of empire. Fung's videos are especially significant in that through such acts and performances they index, reflect upon and are reflexive of some of the most energized topics and debates confronting various discourses like cultural studies, anthropology, queer theory and performance studies. In the end, white sock sheathed over his hybrid's hand like a magical prophylactic, protecting him from the disciplinary effect of colonial power, the queer gesture of Fung's wave deconstructs and ruptures the white mythologies of ethnotopia and pornotopia.³⁷

³⁷ Fung's videos are available through Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 112 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 312, Chicago, Illinois 60603. Tel. 312 345 3550

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Video poetics: technology, aesthetics and politics

DIMITRIS ELEFTherIoTIS

Technology remains a prominent yet troublesome category in the critical and theoretical discourse around video. This article proposes a conceptual framework for the theorization of new audiovisual technologies which escapes the intellectual 'traps' of technological determinism, symptomatic technology and ideological determinism,¹ and establishes strong conceptual links between technology, aesthetics and politics. Martin Heidegger's theorization of 'technology as a form of revealing' is the pivotal point of my analysis. Heidegger identifies as the essence of modern technology an 'ordering revealing' (the production of orderly and ordered representations) closely related to an understanding of the world both as a 'standing-reserve'² (resources to be exploited) and as a 'picture'³ (the objectification of the world through perspectival systems of representation).

The relationship between technology and power is also central in the work of Michel Foucault: modern 'technologies of vision' (such as the panopticon) are analysed as structures of power 'coupled' with forms of 'visibility' that produce the 'normal' and the 'orderly'. The link between video and technologies of power is more than evident in the ever-increasing use of electronic surveillance as a technology of social regulation. Going against the normalizing, regulating, objectifying essence of modern technology (*Ge-stell* or Enframing) Heidegger proposes and describes a 'Poetic' technology;⁴ Jean-François Lyotard's appropriation of the Kantian 'Sublime'⁵ and more specifically his work on 'acinema'⁶ can be seen as contemporary, more politicized versions of 'Poesis'.

In what follows I will explore and evaluate some of the issues,

1 For a comprehensive discussion of technological determinism and symptomatic technology, see Raymond Williams *Television Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974). For a good example of ideological determinism, see Noël Burch, 'Charles Baudelaire v. Dr Frankenstein', *Afterimage* nos. 8/9 (1981).

2 Martin Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology' in *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

3 Heidegger, 'The age of the world picture' in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

4 Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology'.

5 See Jean-François Lyotard 'Presenting the unrepresentable the sublime' *Artforum* April 1982, 'The sublime and the avant garde' *Artforum* April 1984, 'Philosophy and painting in the age of experimentation: contribution to an idea of postmodernity' *Camera Obscura* no. 12 (1984).

6 Lyotard 'Acinema', *Wide Angle* vol. 2 no. 3 (1978).

arguments and contradictions around the Poetic potential of video technology.⁷

7 Heidegger's theory is used to discuss television in Tony Fry (ed.) *RUA/TV? Heidegger and the Televisual* (Sydney Power Publications, 1993) 'Poesis', nevertheless is discussed only in passing

Heidegger: technology as a 'form of revealing'

In his 1954–5 essay/lecture 'The question concerning technology' ('*Die Frage nach der Technik*') Heidegger questions the 'essence' of technology. Essence (*Wesen*) in the Heideggerian sense is not an essentialist category – on the contrary it implies an exploration of how a term like technology 'endures', how it 'pursues its course' through history; in more contemporary (and perhaps more accurate) terminology, the essence of technology (by no means unique, unified or ahistorical) is to be discovered in the particular way in which the term 'technology' is located within discursive formations and, more specifically, in relation to the crucial discursive categories of nature, art and subject–object articulations.

Heidegger's conclusion is that the essence of technology is not itself technological but rather it is a 'mode of revealing': the technical apparatus is a mere cause that 'brings forth' objects, that makes objects 'present themselves', that 'reveals' objects to subjects. The particular way in which subject and object are related through and in technology is the essence of technology.

Heidegger identifies two antagonistic forms that this mode of revealing takes: Enframing (*Ge-stell*) and Poesis (from the Greek ποιησις – poetry, the art of making). Enframing represents the essence of modern techno-science, according to Heidegger, although Poesis is not ruled out as a possibility (it represents a subordinate or 'latent' essence of technology) – this paper will investigate precisely the possibility of Poesis in relation to video.

Let us concentrate on Enframing for the moment. The Heideggerian *Ge-stell* is an ordering revealing that produces the world as a 'standing-reserve' and nature as a totality of calculable forces which are at the disposal of man⁸ to be tamed, mastered, ordered and exploited:

The essence of technology lies in Enframing. Its holding sway belongs with destining. Since destining at any given time starts man on a way of revealing, man, thus under way, is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and pushing forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards on this basis.⁹

Furthermore, *Ge-stell* as the essence of a technology that orders the world and produces the order of the world, is of the same nature (an ordering revealing) as the 'World Picture' (*Weltbild*), the vision of the world in order and the visual order of the world, as Heidegger explains in his seminal essay, 'The age of the world picture'. The

8 'Man' (as opposed to human being or man/woman) is used to designate the subject of predominantly (if not exclusively) male discourses and practices. Man seems to me to be the appropriate term for the subject of discourses and practices concerned with dominance, mastery and control.

9 Heidegger 'The question concerning technology' pp 26–7

production of the 'world picture' presupposes a position for man as the 'visual orderer' of the world – through Renaissance perspectival systems, nature and the world are techno-scientifically calculated, ordered and represented; simultaneously man is produced in/by the scene of what he produces as representation:

Here to represent means to bring what is present at hand before oneself as something standing over against, to relate it to oneself, to the one representing it and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the *normative realm* [my emphasis] Wherever this happens, man 'gets into the picture' in precedence over what is. But in that man puts himself into the picture in this way, he puts himself into the scene i.e. into the open sphere of that which is generally and publicly represented.¹⁰

¹⁰ Heidegger, 'The age of the world picture', pp. 131–2

The important characteristic of the subject/object relationship that prevails in modern technology and representation is a dual quality of the ordering revealing, the simultaneous positioning of man as the one who produces the world in order and the one who is produced in order; the mastery/ordering of the world orders and masters man. This is a recurring theme and a central concern in the works of Michel Foucault in his analysis of modernity and its forms of political and social organization, representation and technology – man is at one and the same time subject and subjected, unifying and unified, revealing and revealed.

Foucault and the technologies of vision

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault clearly refers to and analyses the close relationship that exists between the discursive and the non-discursive, between forms of knowledge and social practices. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The Birth of the Clinic* he specifically addresses the complex relationship between technologies of power and regimes of visibility.¹¹ The case of the panopticon is of a particular interest as it directly connects discourses of power/knowledge to specific forms of visibility; the panopticon is a technology of vision par excellence based on 'forms of luminosity'¹² which produce orderly distributions of bodies and objects in time and space. Modern power relations (of which the perfect model and metaphor is precisely the panopticon) operate in terms of regimes of visibility that produce the normal and the orderly.

This form of visibility is comparable to the ordering revealing produced by Enframing as the dominant essence of modern technologies of vision (photography, cinema, television, video, and so on). The 'surveying gaze' of the panopticon is in many ways similar to the 'ordering view' of the camera and the 'penetrating look' of the scientist.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Allen Lane, 1977) especially part 3 ch. 3, 'Panopticism'; *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock, 1973) especially ch. 7, 'Seeing and knowing'.

¹² See Gilles Deleuze *Foucault* (London: Athlone Press, 1989) p. 58.

13 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London Tavistock, 1970), p 3–16

14 Ibid., pp 303–43

The peculiarity of modern representation/visibility in comparison to that of the Renaissance (as discussed by Foucault in relation to *Las Meninas*)¹³ lies in the interchangeability of the triple subject position (painter, viewer, king) for every member of the community (in the panopticon the central position in the tower is not reserved for someone special, it can be occupied by anybody or even nobody – that is, by the society collectively). The privileged position in the space of representation is not reserved for the King/God but for every citizen (which on the level of visibility/representation signifies the death of God and the birth of Man).¹⁴

The representational space of modernity is not different from that of the Renaissance in its geometrical construction; the principle of perspective is not abandoned. What, however, changes is the multiplication of subject positions (available in/through the industrial processes of the modern audiovisual technologies) and the creation of a social unity and a community which is not organized by the eye of the King but through its own rational decisions and normalizing processes.

Enframing, film aesthetics and Lyotard's acinema

This brief reminder of certain Foucauldian and Heideggerian concepts had as its sole purpose to define *Ge-stell* as not only the dominant essence of modern technology but also as a historically specific form of production of interrelated and interdependent forms of visibility, modes of subjectivity and structures of social order.

Enframing, thus understood, bears important similarities with the category of the 'cinematic apparatus' extensively analysed by film theorists in the 1970s¹⁵ and theorizations of the construction and organization of cinematic space (a recurring theme in *Screen* during the 1970s).¹⁶ More specifically, Stephen Heath's discussion of the function of the frame is extremely interesting for its etymological, but also conceptual, affinity with Enframing:

In frame: the place of image and subject, view (in early French catalogues a film is called a *vue*) and viewer; frame, framing, moral attitude, the correct position . . . the frame is the reconstitution of the scene of the signifier, of the symbolic, into that of the signified, the passage through the image from other scene to seen; it endures distance as correct position, the summit of the eye, representation.¹⁷

The particular mode of 'putting-in-frame' or 'putting-in-scene' (*mise-en-scene*) that characterizes mainstream cinema is a form of ordering revealing, of organizing and ordering the cinematic signifiers, which contributes to the production of a coherent and meaningful entity which is the film. Enframing as the essence of cinematic technology is nothing else but the movement of framing and

15 See Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London Macmillan, 1981), Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London Macmillan 1980), and Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological effects of the basic cinematic apparatus' *Film Quarterly* vol 28 no 2 (1974–75)

16 See articles by Metz, Heath, Ellis and others

17 Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* pp 11–12

18 Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology' pp 26-8

19 Another of the recurring themes in *Screen* during the 1970s

reframing, from frame to frame, and from shot to shot; it accomplishes (in a way that is simultaneously technological and aesthetic) the spatio-temporal continuity of the film which, along with the progression of a coherent and closed narrative, produces the spectator as a unifying and unified subject. Furthermore, as Heidegger argues, Enframing not only produces whatever is revealed in-frame/in-order, but it also 'conceals revealing itself',¹⁸ it conceals its own presence as a form of ordering revealing, as the essence of a technology which orders vision and masters the world. This concealment is clearly similar to mainstream cinema's mystification of its means of representation (and especially its technical apparatus) that facilitates the production of the 'illusion of reality' effect and of film as a transparent 'world picture'.¹⁹

Enframing, understood in this way, establishes an important homology between mainstream cinema (as a technology of vision that orders the world and unifies the subject), normalizing processes (as technologies of power that produce social order and unity) and technology (in which Enframing produces the ordered and the unified). Jean-Francois Lyotard's article 'Acinema' offers an understanding of cinema and more generally audiovisual technologies, which on the one hand associates them with Enframing, but on the other points towards an alternative similar to that of Poesis.

Lyotard notes that *cinematography*, etymologically but also in practice, is 'writing with movements'. He defines mainstream cinema, thus, as a selection or ordering of movements in a way that results in the production of a meaningful, coherent and unified whole: the movement of the lens, the lights, the colours, the cuts (and the 'action-matches'), continuity and narrative transitivity are all components, constitutive elements of a coherent whole; mainstream cinema is characterized by 'an incessant organizing of movements following the rules of representation for spatial localization, those of narration for the instantiation of language and those of the form "film music"' for the soundtrack'.²⁰

20 Lyotard, 'Acinema', p. 53

Mainstream cinema, according to Lyotard, is the process of selection and elimination of movements: movements which contribute to the production of a meaningful whole ('productive movements') are included, whereas movements considered 'useless' for the whole, which do not contribute to the progress of the narrative, which do not conform with the principles of the composition of the frame or the logic of the sequence ('sterile movements') are excluded. It is the process of putting in the frame, in the scene, in the film, only what is, in one way or another, productive, useful for the whole, it is, in other words, a process of ordering revealing – Enframing. The usefulness of Lyotard's formulation lies in the assertion that the unity of the film is achieved through a process of exclusion – it is at the expense of sterile and 'disorderly' movements that the text obtains its meanings and the subject's unity is produced. It is at the expense of the aberrant

²¹ The 'Digital Image Stabiliser' is a popular feature of many of the new camcorders – it operates through a digital analysis of each frame which detects and eliminates 'abnormal' movements. In a similar fashion visual surveillance technology depends upon the identification of 'abnormal' or 'irregular' movements which disrupt the normal flow of people in a street, a shopping centre or supermarket – research currently undertaken looks for ways in which the detection of abnormal movement can become an automation built into the system.

²² Lyotard, 'Acinema', p. 57

²³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

²⁴ *Ibid.* and see also Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991).

movements (in all senses of the word) that the norm is established and maintained.²¹

Film, according to Lyotard, must be understood as 'a political economy of movement', as a process of normalization which

consists of the exclusion from the scene of whatever cannot be folded back upon the body of the film, and outside the scene, upon the social body. The film, strange formation reputed to be normal, is no more normal than the society or the organism. All of these so called objects are the result of the imposition and hope for an accomplished totality. They are supposed to realize the reasonable goal par excellence, the subordination of all partial drives, all sterile and divergent movements to the unity of the organic body. The film is the organic body of cinematographic movements. It is the ecclesia of images just as politics is that of the partial social organs. This is why direction, a technique of exclusions and effacements, a political activity par excellence, and political activity, which is direction par excellence, are the religion of the modern irreligion, the ecclesiastic of the secular. The central problem for both is not the representational arrangement and its accompanying question, that of knowing how and what to represent and the definition of good or true representation; the fundamental problem is the exclusion and forclusion of all that is judged unrepresentable because non-recurrent.²²

This politicization of the aesthetic makes more sense in the broader context of Lyotardian postmodern cultural politics:

– In art: through the mobilization of the Kantian aesthetic category of the Sublime which valorizes experimentation in a pursuit of the unrepresentable, the non-systematic and the non-recurrent, perceives of the subject as being in a perpetual state of turmoil and conflict and antagonizes the 'common ground' or shared taste of a (supposedly) unified social body (wherein the aesthetic of the Beautiful operates).

– In the field of knowledge: paralogy, in its search for indeterminacies, paradoxes, new rules and new games is in direct opposition to performativity which subordinates the production of the unknown to capitalist ends.²³

– In politics: the suggested heterogeneity and incommensurability of various (and antagonistic) language games aims at the rejection of totalizing projects or the subordination of the partial and the different to the whole and the same.²⁴

Video poetics I: definitions

Having established the conceptual links between Enframing (as the essence of modern audiovisual technology), regimes of visibility and

power structures, I will now explore the 'Poetic' possibilities of video technology and define some of its political and aesthetic parameters.

We must seek the Poetic, we are told by Heidegger, in 'what comes to presence in technology, instead of merely staring at the technological. So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain held fast in the will to master it.'²⁵

The Enframing/Poesis coupling must be understood in terms of what 'presences itself' in the new audiovisual technologies. Poesis, according to Heidegger, is a non-challenging form of revealing in which objects 'look upon man' rather than being produced by him in an ordered form of visibility. It is similar to the Sublime (as theorized by Lyotard) as it seeks the unrepresentable, that which remains outside a system or does not belong to a 'whole', to a totality that subordinates and orders its parts. We must discover the Poetic in precisely what resists and rejects Enframing. The 'video poetics', that I am suggesting, depends heavily on the conceptual richness of the term 'Poesis', on its ability to bring into play interrelated ideas. The use of 'Poesis' represents a tactical move in a number of ways:

- A discursive space is opened up for technology which is drastically different from that of instrumentality, efficiency, performativity, control and mastery; we move in this sense towards a discourse that is closer to the Poetic essence of video technology.

- A methodological approach is suggested as technology is studied in terms of the visibilities that it reveals: the Poetics of technology as a form of revealing.

- As visibilities structure and are structured by power relations, the technological games pertaining to them constitute important political arenas: Poetics as the politics of Poesis

It is clear then, that the poetics of video technology is based on two interrelated components: politics and aesthetics. I will divorce momentarily, and for the convenience of argumentation, these two otherwise inseparable categories, and seek the Poetic in each one of them.

1. *Political Poesis*

Poesis is evident in the ever increasing number of audiovisual works produced by various, heterogeneous and often antagonistic groups or individuals who are systematically mis- or unrepresented by/in the prevailing representational regimes and practices

The works produced by various video workshops, collectives, units or independent artists resist unification, fragment representation and reassert heterogeneity. The different antagonistic audiovisual works and practices shatter the unity of the social body. They represent only themselves as 'movements' (in the political and aesthetic sense as analysed by Lyotard) which are partial and resist the order of the whole 'that there be order in the movements, that the movements be

made in order, that they make order'.²⁶ They are, in this sense, 'sterile movements' made with the sole purpose of asserting their partial existence, of expressing their own localized interests and aesthetic views – they do not contribute to the production of a coherent, unifying and unified social and representational whole. This practice does not belong to an ordering revealing, an Enframing that orders social life in/with representation; it is Poetic as it produces the un-presented and the un-represented, the different and the non-recurrent.

2. *Aesthetic Poesis*

Poesis is also evident in the production of audiovisual works of experimental character which is governed not by the desire to master technology (and produce the recognizable 'good' forms and the ordered reality that Enframing guarantees), but by an opening up to what technology can reveal (the non-recurrent, non-recognizable, non-determinate, non-expected or non-mastered/ordered). Poesis as experimentation is not determined by the drive to improve and develop the forms and techniques which are established in the prevailing representational practices but, on the contrary, it seeks and produces the 'sterile, aberrant movements' which, as Lyotard argues, are excluded from the organic whole, the unity of a mainstream film.

Hence Lyotard's definition of 'acinema' (a cinema of *jouissance* and disorderly movement) as that which is 'situated at the two poles of cinema taken as a writing of movements: thus extreme immobilization and extreme mobilization'.²⁷ These two tendencies can, indeed, be seen as characterizing many of the formal qualities of audiovisual works produced by various experimental, 'underground' or avant-garde film and video makers and performers. To reduce Poesis, nevertheless, to these two tendencies as the cornerstones of artistic experimentation is to deprive the term of its conceptual richness. We must understand Poesis in a wider context and not limited in the deconstruction of a political economy of movement that operates in cinema.

Gilles Deleuze in his work on Foucault describes a postmodern visibility that has something of the poetic: in the 'superfold', the 'unlimited but finite' sets of possibilities and combinations opened up (by contemporary techno-science)²⁸ for objects, we witness the emergence of surprising new relationships which are multiple and irregular, catastrophic and chaotic. On the computer monitor or the video screen, unexpected, unpredictable and indeterminate forms and images (the products of artistic or scientific experimentation) make their appearance.

The experimental artist 'apprehends' (rather than reveals in order), objects, forms and relations. He/she is open to what Lyotard calls a

27 Ibid p 57

28 Deleuze *Foucault*, appendix 'On the death of man and superman'

simple event, a 'raw state', 'an occurrence' (*ein Ereignis* – a term borrowed from Heidegger). Like the subject of Poesis (the Greek *υποκειμενον* – a subject which has nothing in common with the modern subject of Enframing) he/she must 'gather and save, catch up and preserve what opens itself in its openness, and must remain exposed to all its sundering confusions'.²⁹

Video poetics II: contradictions, arguments and propositions

Within this area, in which video technology politically and/or aesthetically reclaims and recaptures its Poetic essence we must identify a number of important and interrelated issues which are not only central to critical and aesthetic concerns and debates, but they also determine different political positions, practices and strategies

1. Funding

Something similar to Enframing, operating within Arts institutions, threatens Poesis. The need and the competition for funds, sponsoring, and access to equipment and information provided by public or private bodies and institutions, reintroduces Enframing in the most indirect yet blatant way. In these processes, the criteria applied and the judgements concerning 'results' (finished or unfinished works) threaten to reintegrate the various 'sterile movements' into the social whole by directly or indirectly imposing values of 'good forms', 'social responsibility, relevance or usefulness', 'proper' or 'innovative' or 'interesting' use of technology, and so on, thus transforming those movements into productive ones, components of a new (possibly expanded) consensus

The aesthetic category/audiovisual genre 'video art' is particularly crucial from this perspective. Marita Sturken in her analysis of certain 'paradoxes in the evolution' of video concentrates on the institutional prioritization (by important US funding bodies such as the New York State Council on the Arts [NYSCA] and the Rockefeller Foundation, and by major museums of modern art such as the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA]) of 'video art' over the more 'documentary' type of video works produced by various collectives.³⁰ Most importantly, for the purposes of this paper, Sturken notes.

The Rockefeller Foundation's decision to explore artists' television and to fund postproduction centers, and the fact that NYSCA can, by law, only fund organizations and not individuals were major factors in shaping the video community as it evolved. From the beginning, public television and art institutions became the primary arbiters of taste, deciding what was worth producing and worth watching. Throughout the 1970s, this kind of funding structure not only served to influence what kind of tapes were made, it also

30 Marita Sturken 'Paradox in the evolution of an art form: great expectations and the making of a history' in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (eds) *Illuminating Video: an Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture/Bay Area Video Coalition 1990) pp 101–24

served to establish the increased demand for production values. One of video's early attractions as a medium was its low cost, which fit perfectly with the idea of everyone being (and being able to afford to be) a producer. The role of funders and museums has also served to emphasize production values, and many artists, unhappy with life on the fringes of these institutions, wanted access to commercial techniques. The prohibitive cost of making videotapes with current production values has in turn served to strengthen the influence of funders and exhibiting institutions. . . . The role played by institutions has also been a central factor in the dichotomy of art and social issues in video. Many of video's funding institutions, such as the New York State Council on the Arts, began to veer away from financing community-based, information-oriented works to funding 'video art' by the mid-1970s.³¹

31 Ibid., p. 112

Furthermore, the centrality of 'production values', 'technological innovation', 'exploration of the specificities (and technical possibilities) of the medium' in institutional discourses and practices is closely connected with establishing hierarchical structures which have been repeatedly criticized for excluding marginalized groups.

On the other hand, the funding of artists or groups who belong to misrepresented or unrepresented groups is not without problems: Sneja Gunew in her discussion with Gayatri Spivak³² concerning cultural politics in Australia, notes:

what seems to happen in very crude ways, within the context of multiculturalism, is that certain people are elevated very quickly to those who speak for *all* immigrants: in terms of funding, and in terms of the dissemination of their work, etc. As a result, you don't hear about the rest, because 'we have covered that', and those few token figures function as a very secure alibi. If you look at the proportion of, for example, multicultural, non-Anglo-Celtic artists who get funded by the Australian Council, they are a very small percentage, and often the same ones every year.³³

32 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
'Questions of multi-culturalism' in
Sarah Harasym (ed.) *The
Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews,
Strategies, Dialogues* (New York:
Routledge 1991)

33 Ibid., p. 60

'Tokenism' is, indeed, very common and very powerful, not only within Arts institutions but also within the academy and the critical discourse around audiovisual technologies.

2. Theory

We discover in this form of Poesis (representations of/by 'movements' that are 'sterile' in the sense that cannot be folded back upon the social body) a disturbing contradiction, an alarming conflict between spheres: what belongs to the Poetic in terms of its un-representedness in the social ordering (the social sphere) – in other words, the audiovisual works of misrepresented or unrepresented groups – can simultaneously belong to Enframing in terms of the use of representational forms and conventions (the aesthetic sphere) – for

example, the frequent use of realist forms by video makers whose main aim is to give representation to their misrepresented or unrepresented realities.

I am clearly unable to resolve this contradiction (which is indeed central in such concepts as 'the autonomy of art', 'the reintegration of art in the praxis of everyday life', 'the role of the avant garde', and so on.³⁴ I believe, nevertheless, that it is worth expressing some tentative thoughts, at this point.

The contradictory (in the sense discussed above) character of Poesis is theoretically useful: it articulates the social and the aesthetic in conflict and necessarily points towards the potential incommensurability of the two spheres. The understanding of the social as a multitude of conflicting, heterogeneous language games becomes crucial; aesthetic and social values must be seen as operating in strictly localized, rigorously contextualized frames of reference. The latter points towards a double shortcoming of the film theory of the 1970s:

- the totalizing, universalizing nature of the 'mainstream cinema vs modernism' dualism that dominates theory leaves untheorized and marginalized 'other' cinemas and unproblematically identifies realism as an ideological weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie;

- the absence of a serious engagement with questions of value, leaves without critical opposition values already in operation (in the form of professional or production values, in the form of romantic aesthetic categories, in the form of pragmatic criteria such as popularity or marketability). Some of the political consequences of this critical lacuna have been identified and analysed by Charlotte Brunsdon in her article 'Problems with quality'.³⁵

Two propositions can be formulated firstly, a negative one, in relation to Lyotard's 'language games' A genuine commitment to heterogeneity necessarily leads to the abandonment of aesthetic categories as universalizing as the Sublime. Even if the Sublime is thought of as being pertinent to a very specific language game (that is, the avant garde), it inevitably reintroduces (in its opposition to the Beautiful [everything else?]) a clearly totalizing and unproductive opposition between high and low culture. Secondly, a positive one, suggesting that video criticism should pay particular attention to the context in which video works are produced, distributed and received. Critical analysis must locate individual works within their specific, local context and understand them as 'moves' within a complex (but always local and knowable in its locality) network of power relations, aesthetic categories and values, institutional practices, modes and conditions of production and consumption, and so on.

3. *Experimentation and innovation*

We need to be aware of the danger that the search for the unrepresentable (in the form of unexplored technological possibilities)

³⁴ Especially associated with the Frankfurt School and New German Critique

³⁵ Charlotte Brunsdon 'Problems with quality' *Screen* vol 31 no 1 (1990), pp 67–90

can easily become a process of fetishization of an expanded, but nevertheless limited and controlled, array of techniques and effects. The notion of the 'effect' (or 'special effect') is crucial: what is poetically revealed in/through experimentation becomes just another feature in a vast repertoire of technological capacities; what 'presences itself' as 'aberrant', 'sterile' or 'irregular' movement can become the 'standing-reserve', a 'productive' movement in an expanded form of Enframing. Mastering and repeating the 'effect' are not only fundamental in terms of 'production values' as discussed above, they are also important prerequisites in a quest for technological 'excellence'. In this sense the 'effect' belongs to the stability of a dominant paradigm under which a technological idea is successfully and repetitively exploited and developed.

Experimentation must be contrasted to innovation. Poesis belongs to the catastrophic, the chaotic and the unpredictable and stands in opposition to the evolutionary; innovation, on the other hand, seeks to improve established forms and develop new, more 'efficient' techniques. The fetishization of effects by the artists (which can be explained perhaps by the special fascination that the new technologies exert) is wholeheartedly endorsed by the industry: effects are highly marketable and profitable. The spectacle of technological possibilities attracts equally artists and audiences and yields profit to the industry. Experimentation compromised by innovation leads to an inevitable exchange of the aesthetic for the economic.

4. *Pleasure*

Lyotard closely relates his acinema to a form of *jouissance* which he associates with the production of sterile movements. Under the title 'Pyrotechnics' he distinguishes between a productive (or proper) use of a match which belongs to the cycle of capital ('to light the gas that heats water for the coffee which keeps you alert on your way to work')³⁶ and a sterile use of it, by a child, for instance, who 'strikes the match-head to see what happens – just for the fun of it – he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colours, the light flashing at the height of the blaze, the death of the tiny piece of wood, the hissing of the tiny flame. He enjoys these sterile differences leading nowhere, these uncompensated losses.'³⁷

While I feel that this is indeed an accurate way of describing the pleasures involved in an experimental encounter with the use of new technologies (video is usually described as a postmodern medium in its 'depthlessness', in its 'enjoyment' of 'techniques' for their own sake, in its use of effects not for what they 'mean' but for what they 'do'),³⁸ I also strongly believe that this is only a part of the story. There are powerful forces of discrimination and structures of inequality and exploitation in operation in society which drastically limit the chances of significant segments of the population even being tempted to 'strike the match-head' of technology 'just for the fun of

³⁶ Lyotard, 'Acinema', p. 53

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 53–4

³⁸ See Sturken 'Paradox in the evolution of an art form' pp. 115–19

it' – not only in terms of economic possibilities but also because technology is closely associated with masculine fantasies of power, mastery, control, superiority, domination. This association of the Poetic with *jouissance* is another facet of the contradiction in Poesis that I discussed earlier in terms of the experimental/realist opposition. *Jouissance* as a purely aesthetic experience is prioritized over different forms of pleasure that can be of a more social or political nature and derive from the challenge to dominant representations or regimes of truth.

On Interpretation: Bill Viola's *The Passing*

SEAN CUBITT

For Robin Rusher: 'What you depart from is not the way'

Bill Viola's single-monitor, fifty-five minute tape *The Passing* was jointly funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the German Television station ZDF for its *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* slot, and was broadcast in Britain on Channel Four in December 1993 to coincide with a major retrospective of Viola's work at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix in the USA and by Film and Video Umbrella in Britain, the piece has been greeted as a major work of video art from one of its star practitioners. The issue of interpretation arises because the work is opaque, resistant to any straightforward and intuitive understanding, quite probably because it deals with death, a limit point of the communicable. Neither death nor communication occurs in the abstract but in the concrete, so in this article I propose to try to work through issues of interpretation as they arise in this specific textual and critical activity, working from criticism rather than theory in order to explore what the act of interpretation might involve.

Where we learn most about communication is where it is most difficult: in the communication of extreme (albeit familiar) states of mind. Like many other video artists, Viola makes works (not all of his works, but some) that draw upon his own life for their material. Sometimes this is autobiographical in a fairly straightforward sense; at other times, Viola distorts the living of his life in order to shape it into material of which art can be made: for *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1983), for example, he spent three days without sleep

in order to find the hallucinatory grounds for this tape and installation. This extreme of perception is not uncharacteristic of his works, which draw frequently on Christian and Buddhist mystical traditions (*Room for St John of the Cross* [1983], *Anthem* [1983]) and from trance states (*I Do Not Know What It Is That I Am Like* [1989]). Viola's pursuit of these states can be understood as a critique of political individualism, even of Cartesian subjectivity, although it is at odds with, and cannot be reduced to, the poststructural critique of the fragmented subject or identity politics. Rather, Viola pursues irreducible and, to some extent, unspeakable moments of consciousness: limit points of the communicable. This is perhaps why the reception of this tape, like others of Viola's, has been so frequently marked by a flurry of abstract nouns and impressionistic adjectives. One finds oneself falling back on words that have lost their currency in contemporary media theory: words like 'grace', 'awe' and 'beauty'. It is one aspect of this interpretation to understand why such words suggest themselves to the tape's reviewers.

In *The Passing*, the image does not always fill the screen: Viola treats the aspect ratio of the monitor rather as Griffiths did the Academy Standard screen, as a field in which a variety of shapes and sizes of image could be framed. As a result, I am far more aware of black in *The Passing*'s screens, of the blackness as a ground on which the illuminated figures are placed, so that depth is a central element of the visual impact of the piece. Where a black screen gives way to a light



Blackness as a ground on which illuminated figures are placed. *The Passing* (Bill Viola, 1991). Picture courtesy: Film and Video Umbrella

one, I am aware that the dark persists beneath the flaring phosphors, so that 'depth' is not only spatial but temporal. The figure becomes visible by overlaying or by replacing the black ground on which it is laid. That blackness is the ground zero of the tape's production of meaning: it makes each image emerge from the screen, so making the monitor act as a kind of projector, while at the same time it persists, both spatially and temporally, as the possibility of the empty screen, the absence of meaning, the end of communication.

The 'passing' of the title refers to the passing on of the artist's mother and the passing on of genetic and cultural material to his infant son, to the passing of time, the passage of the Angel of Death, the passing of the artist's involvement from mother to child, and a passing between dream and waking. At the centre of the tape are senses of bereavement, mortality and loss. In a quite fundamental sense, the 'hallucinatory' qualities of the tape derive both from these extremes of emotional turmoil, and the effort to form them into aesthetic order, *and* from the technical use of the black screen as a ground from which the lighter passages are lifted by the contrast. The isolation of individual shots, both on the screen as a whole and by often abrupt edits, reconfirms both the fragility of sense-making in a field defined by loss, and the way in which loss impels sense-making.

'... the burial of the dead is perhaps the fundamental phenomenon of being human'.¹ Gadamer says that the communicative act of mourning the dead brings about a spiralling 'out of the order of nature' and a turn 'against the natural vital instincts of survival'. He goes on to argue that the traits of an 'essentially human practice' initiated in burial are labour, socialization and language, and, through language, 'a certain distance in relation to what is present at any given moment, for language brings about presence' concluding that 'It is precisely the excess beyond what is necessary for the mere preservation of life that distinguishes [the individual's] action as human action'.² *The Passing* deals with just such a transition from silence to communication, with the experience of loss as the grounds of communication, and with the formative contradiction of the enormity of death, against which we must also recognize its necessity. The video is then both a record of gifts laid at the burial site, and such a gift itself, a pledge that death will not get the last word.

The 'last word' is the one which unifies the primary processes of condensation and displacement, metaphor and metonymy, as each pursues its uncompromisable aim of completion. The subject strives along the chain of signifiers for self-revelation and, simultaneously, but at odds with this first impulse, it seeks to realize the marriage of language and the object. In the last word, the word and its objects, the subject and its words, become one in the moment of their mutual disappearance. It is that last word towards which this work tends, unlike, I would argue, much contemporary electronic media art with its obsessive search for seamless surfaces and edit-free transitions on

1 Hans-Georg Gadamer 'What is practice? The conditions of social reason' in Frederick G. Lawrence (ed. and trans.), *Reason in the Age of Science* (Boston: MIT Press, 1981), p. 75

2 *Ibid.*, p. 77

screens glowing with childlike colours, flooded with light, in which, as I have argued elsewhere,³ we can discern the emergence of a narcissistic healing of the loss of union with the world and the mother's breast, characteristic of pre-Oedipal infancy. *The Passing* suggests that an adult world must learn how to mourn beyond the return to primary narcissism so characteristic of western bereavement: must embrace death, not refuse it.

Death, however, exists twice: as one's own death, and as one's death for others. In our own death, we face the unspeakable in which all speech is completed and the final silence descends. All speech and all symbolic action is premised against this silence, rages against the dying of the light. But at the same time, the deaths of others mark the beginning of speech, as Gadamer argues, and not only as a premonition of our own, driven to speech by the awareness of time's wingèd chariot drawing near. The rituals of mourning mark a refusal to accept the finality of an other's death, and an insistence on the continuity between the dead and the living, so that in a certain way the dead abide with us. In refusing finality, mourning successfully accomplished escapes the cultural privilege afforded to closure, completion, integrity of the person, wholeness, autonomy, individuality and the coherence of the present. Viola's aesthetic is not one of rendering whole what has been torn apart in death, but one that prizes the ways in which death marks the abandonment of the effort towards coherence and closure, the triumph of openness (in which word I would like to hear an echo of the German *Offenlichkeit*, usually translated as 'publicity' or 'the public sphere').

There are elements of *The Passing* that read as images from a family album, albeit an unusual one, in that it includes what is most often excluded from the family's set of recollections – images of dying and death – along with toddlers' first steps, birth and holidays. The exclusion of funerals from the standard family archive is unusual, given their prominence in family life, and may perhaps be partly accounted for by the ways in which deaths influence the meanings that albums can produce. Certainly no image is the same after the person in it has died. But there is also a sense in which, at a certain moment, the relationships and the motivations that anchor meaning in even the most banal of family albums die away, and the images are let slip from their anchorage in the family's own ideolects, becoming a form of allegory: symbols freed of the artifice of their meanings. We learn how profoundly the meanings of words, of things, of gestures and sounds belong to the bodies that utter or point them out. Without that belonging, symbols are severed from the ideolectal systems in which their meanings are precise, and become polysemic, or rather fluid, as happens in the high-cultural symbol systems of William Blake or Odilon Redon. It is not that these lack the 'levels' of polysemy, but that their lack of precise distinction between levels, or between individual symbols, becomes the grounds for their peculiar density,

productivity and complexity. Such symbols – like *The Passing*'s Joshua trees – once deprived of the local system that prescribes their sense, become mediators of meanings which we might read *in* or which they disseminate *out*. They lose the organic linkage of form and content, vehicle and theme that once bound them, and begin to take on the lineaments of semiosis.

Where human voices are perceptible in the sound mix of *The Passing*, they are heard through echoes and mufflings, like the voices of children in a swimming pool: voices without words, but voices still, to which one can imagine aspiring, or to which you can imagine yourself bidding farewell. A distance, a space, separates voice and recording/replay which is at once temporal, as in all recording, and also representational, in that it seeks, in the distanced quality of the sound, to represent the gaps between the infant who has yet to learn, and the old woman taking her leave of, language, even as each can recognize the tones of voices, above and beyond their content. For *The Passing*, this semiosis is the moment at which the moments of infancy and death are bonded into a circle, or rather, as Gadamer has it, a spiral. Childhood and dying have privileged access to that moment of communication at which the fact of communication, rather than its determinate content, is central.

Like most of Viola's tapes, *The Passing* eschews dialogue and verbal language, taking up a position towards language that seems strongly bound to the American Transcendentalist tradition of Emerson, for whom 'poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem',⁴ and Whitman, who wrote 'Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd, I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell'.⁵ Such an intuition of both the immanence of divinity in the natural world, and of the essential capabilities of human beings to reach through the veils of their own culture to commune with it, is close to Viola's pantheistic landscape art, as it is, for example, to the landscape painting of Georgia O'Keeffe or to the films of Stan Brakhage. The point, rather different to eastern mysticism, is that the artist should open him or herself to that beauty which is not only in the world but which is the secret essence of the world. Indeed, Viola recounts an experience highly relevant to this work in a recent interview

When I was out in the desert, in the South West, in '87, I brought all this equipment – different cameras, telescopes, infra-red cameras, super wide-angle lenses – and I started shooting during the first

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays, First and Second Series* [1844] (London: Everyman's Library, n.d.), pp. 2–7

5 Walt Whitman, 'Song of the open road' in *Leaves of Grass* [1895] (London: Everyman's Library 1947), p. 130

6 Nick Stewart *Slowly turning narrative*, *Hybrid*, no 2 (1993)
p 13

month. But then I ran into this block which it took me several years to recover from. I was unable to shoot. A lot of the time I was outdoors, sleeping in a tent, in this vast space, and this little thing, the camera, became a limiter. It's not a window on the world. You point it here, and you stand there, at this particular time and you have excluded everything else. So during that period I couldn't work. I'd pick up the camera and it seemed like a joke that I could even consider that I could reflect the experience of this vast area and the world.⁶

The problem then becomes one of how to see the world when it is instantly mediated by the camera: how to indicate an openness to the object of vision, so that it ceases to be an object and becomes a subject; or how to represent the process or unification of subject and object, when the technology is always already constructed in such a way as to limit the world and its processes, including subjective processes, to the limits of an object.

A mode of interpretation of *The Passing* then becomes available which centres on the way Viola can be constructed as an artist in the twentieth-century tradition, one who works on the specificity of the medium, and whose central concern is with the mode of representation. What is somewhat different, in Viola's case, is that it is not the *thing-ness*, the *haecceitas*, of the world which is in question in representation, but perception itself: how does one represent perception in the video medium? A key strategy is an aesthetic of video as light. The imagetrack is carefully constructed as itself a light source. But the tape also queries the interaction of profilmic light sources – table-lamps, sun, moon, stars, headlights, matches and so on – and filters, reading the desert sun in day-for-night, the night-time landscape in infra-red, underwater sequences on daylight settings and so forth. What is at stake is neither the construction of the tape as a discrete object functioning as an autonomous light, nor the question of the representation or mediation of light, but much more the ways in which the recording and manipulation of light in the production process enact the processes of perception themselves. Many shots depend for their composition and their power on the refraction, flare, curvature, diffusion and diffraction of light within the lens, not simply in the framing, but in mobile framing, so that the presence of the lens to the image can become apparent during the shot. Here too, the perceptive apparatus is reconstructed, neither as duped recipient of false impressions, nor as sole purveyor of constructed and artificial perceptions, but as the unstable bridge between the eye and the video apparatus as receivers and as producers of light.

Though this might easily be read as a technologically astute variant on the Greenbergian notion of work at the level of the technical qualities of the medium, I think the variation from Greenberg is more important than the proximity. Greenberg's aesthetic revolves around

the production of discrete objects within the world. Viola's work in *The Passing* is organized around the gradual disturbance of barriers between the viewer and the moment of perception in such a way as to reproduce the conditions for revelation.

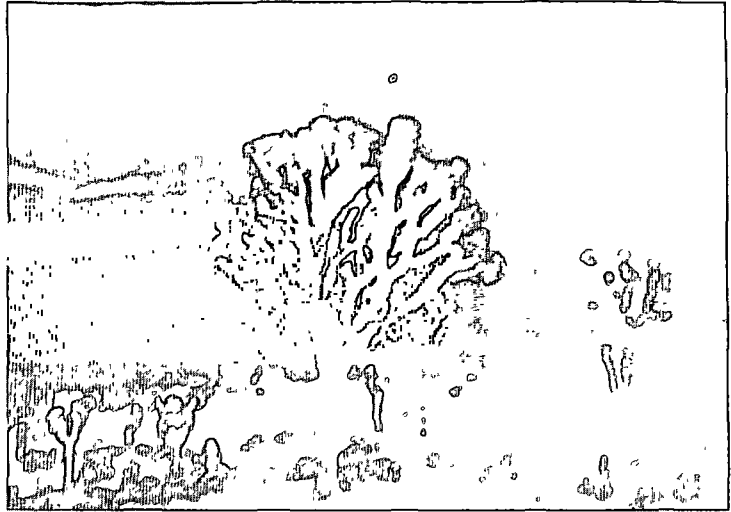
At the same time, it is clear that Viola is not an abstractionist, and that the purposes of the tape include an address to an actually existing – if reluctant – reality. The kinds of reality that are here important include the landscapes of half-a-dozen major National Parks of the southwestern USA, not least those which reverberate with the cultural intensities of the geological history of the area, including, in a powerful internal rhyming, ancient sea-floors. Such an interest in geology also places Viola in an American tradition, notably that of the poets Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, with whom he also shares a deep respect for and interest in space as key to the American experience.⁷ There is a kind of geographical edge to Viola's placing of the camera, by a road or a railway, inside an interior, by a bed – a sense of the physical position of the camera within the world that it seeks to record. As in his earlier tape, *I Do Not Know What It Is That I Am Like*, the microphone too is marked as present, notably here in the two shots in which the camera and submerged microphone emerge from under water to follow the child from the sea onto the beach, and at the end of the tape, in which the motion is reversed.

This interest in the actually existing forms of the world is part and parcel of Viola's attempt to understand and remake the mode of perception, a remaking that becomes possible with the electronic camera in particular, where the image is constantly open to manipulation, but which is nonetheless both finite and fragmentary. The fragmentation of the image down to the level of the single pixel is remarkably clear in this tape, especially in those sequences in which profilic events are used to focus attention on minute portions of the screen image. These take various forms, the most technically striking of which is the pan shot of a desert highway which catches, so swiftly you are unsure that it is really there, three flashes of lightning inside a distant cloud. These concentrations on the effects of light in landscape or underwater, and most particularly at the thresholds of night and day, shore and sea, not only multiply the number of possible interpretations of specific ambiguous images, simultaneously creating micro-narratives for the viewer seeking to define and name a particular shot, but they also create a further level of complexity at the point of perception and its representation.

On the one hand, there are a series of images of the fragility of human artefacts, especially of the ruins of houses, shacks and caravans in the desert and in floods, a fragility which nonetheless places them in a direct and poignant relationship with the environmental forces around them. Yet these integral locations, in which the human has earned its place in the ecology (as a perch for a gull . . .) by its very propensity for ruin, are punctuated by other scenes in which the

7 Ibid., pp. 12–15

The Joshua trees brought to life by people for whom the effect is invisible *The Passing* (Bill Viola, 1991) Picture courtesy Film and Video Umbrella



landscape becomes a projection of headlights, in which the Joshua trees, lit up by speeding cars and casting their mobile shadows on the nightscape, are animated, brought to life, by people for whom, by the evidence of the parallel shot from inside the car, the effect is invisible. The relations of human and landscape, even worked upon with the eye of a video artist, for whom the temporal effects of light are central, remain marked by the spaces between the natural and the human landscape, nowhere more poetically expressed than in the three shots of trees growing in (sub)urban parking lots. Yet even here, the gap is not posed as tragic or unbridgeable: the transition in the next three shots to views of office blocks at night reserves for them the same loving attention to the effects of light, the same sense of immanence, that the tape otherwise deploys over treasured sites of unspoilt natural beauty.

The question of beauty, then, appears in the context of *The Passing* in terms of a spirituality for which the artist, in interviews and prose writings, most frequently uses language drawn from a range of mystical and religious sources, East and West. There is a shot in *The Passing* in which a young woman's face appears dimly in a grainy, dim screen, drifting into vision so faintly that you are unsure whether it is your perception that is changing or the quality of the image. She seems not to be the same woman as the grandmother, and though the image is faint, you presume she is the mother of the artist's child. But the relation between the artist and the 'sitter' is loosened both by the gap between the audience and the artist's autobiography, and by the quality of the image, so that the face becomes a cypher, both an iconic image of someone and a sign, drawing on the western traditions of

female portraiture, of beauty. And yet she, and it, are only dimly visible, and the strain to decipher the image counteracts the ease with which it might otherwise beckon

Viola's beauty is a quality which pervades the tape in the same way that the moment of revelation pervades it as something whose existence is never in doubt, but which nonetheless is never wholly graspable. It is as if the problems that haunt Kant's aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgement*⁸ have returned in the age of the electronic arts. In the *Critique*, the aesthetic is specifically not the experience of the subject in relation to the object but, as taste, is the pleasure deriving from the recognition that beauty is common, and that recognizing it is thus simultaneously to recognize one's membership of a commonality. And yet the figure that I have suggested reading as a signifier of beauty is, I think, legible quite differently by the artist and by the viewer, as indeed are all the human figures here, save only perhaps the artist himself who, as both the sleeper and the drowned man, is a public performer with a public name. Yet this very act of giving us glimpses of a family album while rejecting its traditional complement in the form of commentary ('This is Doreen at Blackpool, and here we are at Robin Hood's Bay . . .') fails to make the closure which would ensure the possibility of viewer and artist sharing the same frame of reference.

In an artist's statement for a 1990 catalogue, Viola writes 'These are visual poems, allegories in the language of subjective perception, open to many individual interpretations'.⁹ The same statement also appeals to the specificity of the meanings produced, and to the lack of conjuncture between his works and verbal language. Not surprisingly, then, in this self-contradictory statement, we are confronted with the impasse: you must interpret this work as your own act of perception, yet your interpretation will always be wrong. This is an allegory without a key. The impasse is not only one of Viola's designing. It arrives as a crisis in the notion of criticism and interpretation, in an age in which meaning is no longer anchored in a divine being transcending and inhabiting language. Viola's paradox does, however, begin to unravel if we allow it to occupy time, and if we consider it not as a double bind, but as a dialectical notion of that relationship between people which is marked with the sign of 'beauty'. This is the basic definition one needs in this context for the term 'audience' a relationship entered into on the basis of an act of perception. But since the nature of the time-based arts is that they not only take time, but they have lives that are specifically historical, in that each print of the tape has a history of screenings and viewings, then not only is the audience definable by its distance from authorial intent, but by its internal differentiation over time. The relationship of taste is not marked, in this instance, by commonality, but by difference, and by temporality and change.

Such an aesthetic is clearly excluded from Kantian taste. I cannot

8 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952)

9 Bill Viola, 'Bill Viola: artist's statement' in Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki (eds), *Technologies et Imaginaires: Art Cinéma Art Vidéo Art Ordinateur* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1990). Translation mine

presume that my delight either is or ought to be shared by others, and so cannot presume that the beautiful is the object of a 'necessary delight'. It comes far closer to that realm of views which charm without evoking judgement, which evoke poetic fiction rather than imaginative grasp, and with a description of which Kant concludes the Analytic of the Beautiful.

the peculiar fancies with which the mind entertains itself as it is being continually stirred by the variety that strikes the eye. It is just as when we watch the changing shapes of the fire or a rippling brook: neither of which are things of beauty, but they convey a charm to the imagination, because they sustain its free play.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*
p. 89

Kant's distinction here is between beautiful objects and beautiful views of objects. In the video aesthetic of *The Passing*, this distinction is reversed: beauty is not a property of objects but of the perception of them, a perception condemned to history, just as Kant's aesthetic is an escape from it.

Nonetheless, there is a moment of perception which the tape enacts, and which forms the irrecoverable but permanent referent about which interpretation is invited to revolve, a kind of momentary immortality of the process of perceiving which, by its nature, is itself changing. Kant's error, and the error of the Idealist tradition in this light, is, then, that it mistakes the events that precede perception and which perception will take as its objects, for a manifold of particularities instead of processes, discrete moments rather than relations. In this sense, the notion of passing also encompasses the passage of subjectivity away from and back into the object relations by which and in which it is formed as a subject for those objects. Beauty then arises only when subjectivity is in some sense erased or evaded, but has too the strange property of only existing as beauty when the experience is already over, that is to say when you return from the loss of subjectivity into a reformed subject position: almost the 'emotion recollected in tranquility' of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The oscillation of the subject between self-loss and self-recovery is a temporal phenomenon, even if such oscillations are too swift for human observation. Time is fundamental to the aesthetics of video, and to the kind of beauty which *The Passing* makes available. Like the soundtrack, the images are often indistinct to the point of invisibility, testing our more usual expectations of being able to recognize the profilmic objects of camerawork. The frustration this brings, the sense of grasping and losing hold of the sense of the images and their sequence, is at once part of the tape's representational strategy, and an account of the experience of perception which it wishes to represent: the experience of beauty. As a temporal account of representation and beauty, then, the tape returns us to the relationship we enter into with death.

I have been trying to argue that Viola's aesthetic in *The Passing* reorders the concept of beauty as an historical phenomenon, in the sense that its perception is itself temporal, and therefore occurs within the greater timescales of history. This is in many ways the shape of the experience of viewing the tape as a whole which, even after several viewings, is still difficult to give a form in memory as coherent as, say, a narrative piece, and this even though there are very strong narrative elements to shots, sequences and even the basic premise of the work.

The structural device of the dream is clearly an organizing factor in the tape, lifted from banality by the physicality with which sleep is addressed, in particular by the amplification of the sleeper's close-miked breathing (and its equation, in one edit, with the oxygen-aided breathing of his mother on her deathbed) and the device of using a wide-angle lens for extreme closeups of the sleeper's eye and profile. The proximity in the tape of the family scene with dream-states cannot but evoke Freud. In his 1914 paper on narcissism,¹¹ Freud compares dreaming with illness, as two states in which the libido normally associated with objects is withdrawn from them and instead directed towards the ego (and specifically, in dream, towards the wish to continue sleeping). The same narcissistic binding of libido can be traced, he argues, in the infant child, whose charm 'lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility'.¹² We have in this tape, then, a roster of classic narcissists: the infant child, so full of himself, so complete, so unaffected by the fears and torments of those around him; the sleeper, struggling to stay asleep and gather his affections inward; and the mother, in her last illness receiving the devotion of the man by her bedside with the assurance of those who know that to be loved is their due

In the same essay, Freud notes the movement of libido in the opposite direction: in love, when the lover so devotes his affections to his beloved that he has none left for himself. In such states, he says, 'we have, if nothing else, examples of changes in the distribution of libido that are consequent upon an alteration of the ego'.¹³ Since, only a year later, he was to formalize the notion that one of the vicissitudes that can befall an instinct is its reversal into its opposite,¹⁴ it does not seem out of order to read the former statement in reverse: changes to the distribution of the libido, which binds the ego into an ego, alter the state of the ego itself. It is just such an alteration in libidinal organization that characterizes both mourning and parenthood, and just such a restructuring of the ego which seems to play such a predominant part in the dreamscape of *The Passing*.

In the dream states of *The Passing*, the dreamer's eye acts as a lens through which the transition of affection from mother to child passes. Viola so abases his own self-love as to show himself in the final shot of the film as a drowned and breathless corpse, although this in a

11 Sigmund Freud, 'On narcissism an introduction' in *On Metapsychology: the Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964), pp 65–97

12 *Ibid* p 83

13 *Ibid* p 76

14 Freud 'Instincts and their vicissitudes' in *On Metapsychology: the Theory of Psychoanalysis* pp 113–38

sense is not a closure, but a phase through which the action runs, itself a kind of narrative lens which reorganizes the previous fifty minutes as his whole life flashing before him, or as a narrative which must also presume his death in order for the spiralling whole to continue its course. This 'ending', moreover, is foreshadowed in the way in which the transfer of devotion from mother to child is accompanied by motor dysfunctions, most clearly by the stumbling point-of-view walk along a desert ridge ending with a sudden fall and brusque awakening, but also, throughout the tape, in the permutations of impaired and diffused vision, most notably in the difficulty with which, as I argued above, beauty becomes so dimly perceived.

Such an interpretation might lead us in one of several directions. On the one hand, there is a possibility of constructing an Oedipal narrative in Viola's movement from son to father: this I do not want to pursue, largely because it seems to me reductive, and as such cannot contribute to diversification. A second possibility is to chase the conception of the ego as construct of libido, and therefore changeable according to the precise configurations into which the libido is itself organized in its dealings with reality. This line of thought is particularly attractive because it gives us the leeway to begin to build a history of subjectivity, and in particular of the social configuration of libido, for example in the moving image, in such a way as to make possible a social history of the psyche. This I would like to return to in concluding. A less ambitious reading, however, might concentrate on the ways in which the transference of libido associated with the movement from being a son to being a father loosens the bonds that organize subjectivity into the sociologically recognizable form of individuality, and which, at the risk of a fatal loss of narcissistic impulses, might free the sleeper from the necessity of subjecthood that so impairs the processes of perception

This reading once again returns us to the temporal dimensions of the piece, since we reach another contradictory oscillation, this time between the self-denying loss of self-love on the one hand, and the narcissistic centrality of the dreamer to his own dream on the other. These positions are not simultaneous, but alternating, interacting with one another and with the world, visually in the oscillation between clarity and dimness, aurally in the pulse of the sound of the sleeper's breathing and the soundscapes of the desert and the city street. Libido constantly reforms subjectivity in its relations with the Other, as it alternately throws itself outward into the world and curls itself back into the Ego, is lured by the world, especially by its Others, into reaching out, and then returns upon itself in search of equilibrium. Individuality so conceived is not an illusion but an actually-existing, historical and social phenomenon, that is, one belonging to a specific society and a specific time. It is this subjectivity – which can both give and take, devote itself utterly to the world and its objects, persons and processes and withdraw from it into utter self-absorption, that can

both love and be loved – which is in question. The editing of Viola's tape, particularly, seems to operate less on the traditional virtues of cohesion, logic or even montage, and more according to the dynamics of the psyche, caught in this repeated moment of passage between the self-enclosed worlds of each of the three great narcissistic figures and the bonds of unbounded love that tie them together.

The dominant forms of contemporary audiovisual production, in both electronic and film media, operate within a narcissistic drift in the social formation of subjectivity in the culture at large, a reformulation of individuality, in a period of crisis, in the image of the primary narcissism that precedes the Lacanian mirror phase. Such a drift seems to be visible quite clearly in such recent media forms as console games, and in a more oblique fashion in the development, especially in the late 1980s, of what can be thought of as a neoclassical Hollywood style. Viola's tape, though in certain formal senses deploying very similar techniques to this neoclassicism (the near-360 degree pan, 'invisible' edits, wide-angle establishing shots, the 'montage of effects' of the SFX spectaculars), moves in another direction. New Hollywood is less determined to subordinate style to narration than the classical model, and in this raising of style and, perhaps even more so, mise-en-scene to a new importance, it effects the recentring of subjectivity as in Freud's phrase, 'thaumaturgic' – magically endowed with magical powers, returned to the narcissistic and infantile belief in the power of its own wishes. The subjectivity at stake in neoclassicism is one which is less engaged by narrative and more by the construction of imaginary worlds within which each instance of narrative is reduced in the hierarchy of affective attractions to the standing of one plot among many. On the one hand, this can be seen as the development of an interactive function in media products, simultaneously engaging fantasy and providing a space for the commercial exploitation of associated product ranges. But on the other, it can be apprehended as a form of socialization premised on a widespread inflection of subjectivity away from the interpersonal and towards a relation fundamentally seated in the relation between subject and world, not subject and subject: a narcissistic relation. Such a subjectivity is visible in some of the shots of the infant boy, especially in two shots of him newborn, the face centred in the frame, and crumpled inwards on itself even in the unobtrusive lighting setup used. But such infantile narcissism is only one pole of Viola's construction: recognized as a gravitational pull on subjectivity, but one which has, as oscillating alternates, the truly intersubjective, and, on the further side of narcissism, the unconscious.

In an essay published in 1990, Viola muses on the nature of blackness in video, considering, among others, the three possible states of black (fade to black, the black of lack of signal, and the black of a set

disconnected, equated, possibly ironically, with closing your eyes, sleep and death respectively). In a key discussion of the black of the pupil of the eye, in which he cites Plato's *Alcibiades*, Al-Ghazzali, Meister Eckhart and the Zen priest Taigen Sofu, Viola argues for the pupil as the first and ideal mirror, one in which not only a reflection of the self may be found, but also the act of 'seeing seeing', and in the blackness of the pupil, the void upon which perception, in mystical systems of belief, is founded. He quotes the Zoroastrian belief that the pupil is the corollary of the white disc of the sun, and the tiny image in the 'apple of the eye', 'a person's self, his or her soul, existing in a complementary relationship to the sun, the world's eye'.¹⁵

The 'apple of the eye', the physiologically necessary darkness within which an image can be formed, is then, as in so many poems as well as religious beliefs, the gateway of the soul, the place at which light comes in, but also from which the soul not only looks but pours out into the world. Citing also the Islamic precept that God is invisible because of his very brightness, Viola suggests that 'black becomes a bright light on a dark day, the intense light bringing on the protective darkness of the closed eye; the black of annihilation of the self',¹⁶ and dramatizes this in a dialogue in which one character retells a dream very similar to that portrayed in *The Passing*, ending with the dreamer yielding up his self in an oceanic darkness. The metaphor of the pupil, which is so strongly marked in the tape, can then be read as a pathway, and a passing, between the self's relation with the world and the annihilation of the self, but specifically in the act and the site of perception. For Viola, one might say, the profundities of the human spirit are to be found not in the unconscious, which is in any case 'structured like a language' and therefore kin to the weaknesses of language, but in the preconscious. In 1915, Freud describes the preconscious thus:

it devolves upon the system *Pcs* to make communications possible between the different ideational contents so that they can influence one another, to give them an order in time, and to set up a censorship or several censorships; 'reality-testing' too, and the reality principle are in its province. Conscious memory, moreover, seems to depend wholly on the *Pcs*.¹⁷

An editor's note refers us to a footnote to the paper on narcissism, expanding on the observation that 'the self-criticism of conscience coincides with the self-observation on which it is based' so that 'the developing and strengthening of this observing agency might contain within it the subsequent genesis of (subjective) memory and the time-factor, the latter of which has an application to unconscious processes'.¹⁸

It would be facile to read Viola's tape as a utopian construction of an aesthetics of the unconscious: nothing in the work allows us to presume that what is sought is an abandonment of rationality in favour

15 Bill Viola 'Video black – the mortality of the image' in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (eds) *Illuminating Video: an Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture/Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), p. 485

16 *Ibid.* p. 485

17 Freud 'The unconscious' in *On Metapsychology: the Theory of Psychoanalysis*, p. 193

18 Freud, 'On narcissism' p. 91

of unconsciousness, in the manner of the Jesuitical Bataille. Rather, Viola takes very seriously the specifics of the way in which the subject is formed in processes which are profoundly socialized, and yet which achieve a measure of autonomy from both social instrumentality and even the ego itself. The tape certainly has a utopian aspect, in the sense at least that it is posited upon a kind of continuity, though painful, fragile and subject to many vicissitudes, between the dead and the living, and between the human and natural worlds that share the experience of death, if not of mourning. Where Viola's pupil differs from the Freudian preconscious is that in Freud the individual is a circumscribed and sacrosanct condition of psychological thinking, where for Viola it is the traffic between individual and world that defines each as the object for the other, so the relationship is more relevant than the terms which it establishes and of which it is subsequently established.

Such a mode of preconscious involves two-way communication in an extreme state, one in which the content of the communication is entirely subordinated to the act of communication, or rather to the relationships which make communication both possible and necessary. In *The Passing*, we see in close proximity this necessity of absolute communication, and its obverse, death, in which communication is no longer a two-way procedure, but at once an act of giving to the dead and a withdrawal of libido from them. The deaths of others prefigure the death of communication, a death which for Viola is perversely also the condition for the selfless openness of perception become revelation. The clinching contradiction, which makes communication necessary, is that we can only find the perception worthy of communicating by abandoning the means of communication.

I am as embarrassed as any other cultural studies scholar to find myself writing in the language of mystical religions. But there is here, I think, a kind of embarrassment that may yet prove productive. In the European haste to secularize, some of the fundamentals of what it has felt like to be alive in our time have been elided in the materialist account. Not least, those yearnings and insights for which we are constrained to use the term 'spiritual'. Like the experience of beauty, which nearly embarrasses me as much, to talk about these aspects of life nonetheless seems incumbent on any claim to undertake an analysis, especially a political analysis, of the material conditions of existence. *The Passing* offers an occasion for a possible reworking of some of our assumptions about subjectivity and sociality, about the foundations of contemporary subjectivity in communication rather than language as such, so dear to the Idealist tradition in phenomenology and postmodernism. It might help us escape the vacuousness of Lyotard's return to the Kantian sublime, the insipidity of a world stripped, on the other hand, of aesthesis in so much contemporary

materialist work, and the tender ministrations of the born-again new Right. Both 'bourgeois' individualism and 'religious' mysticism are rightly critiqued, but they should not be ignored. This act of interpretation, with its own centrifugal orbit spiralling out from the core text, was intended to argue the need for a concept of death like that of the late Freud, but stripped of its nineteenth-century entropic biologism, as a counterweight to the 'naive' or 'nostalgic' utopianism of Habermas's communicative rationality. Instead, it has turned back over the question of historicizing the formation of subjectivity in communication. This work seems to me fundamental to unsettling the emergent orthodoxies, to repoliticizing the postmodern, and to the larger project of both understanding the history of modern subjectivity, and contributing to changing it.

In conclusion, I would like to offer, on the basis of this reading of *The Passing*, some theses towards a materialist account of interpretation:

1. The mode of critical rather than theoretical practice seems to unearth a slightly different agenda, and not solely because it takes as its objects specific processes of perception and interpretation. Criticism is more modest, in the sense that it constructs itself as incomplete, transitory, responsive, temporary and, to that extent, open, or at least open to the possibility of openness.
2. In the same way, criticism takes its place within, not without, the borders of communication, which has shifted in quality and intensity with the advent first of the moving image and, I would argue, of electronic imaging and telematics. Criticism then sets itself, as historically bound, the task of communicating communication, on the basis, in the instance of *The Passing*, of the textual process of perceiving perception. So it can both inhabit and see beyond the prison-house of language.
3. The insights of video art are perhaps more profoundly philosophical than the constructions of theory. The attempt to shadow, in interpretation, the process of the text of *The Passing* is a process which subordinates the critic to the text, while at the same time it recognizes, more than the possibility, the inevitability of misrecognition and misinterpretation. These misinterpretations are, from a critical and materialist perspective, both the lifeblood of the flux of communication and its continuing productivity, and the grounds for hope, that is to say, a non-teleological imagination of the future.
4. Vattimo wonders in passing 'Is it not true that the universalization of the domain of information could be interpreted as a perverted realization of the triumph of absolute spirit?'.¹⁹ It is the critic's task to

¹⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press 1988) p. 51

ensure that what remains in play is the possibility that information, the textualization of experience, is not the end of human history.

5. In retaining a notion of experience, even if that experience is, in some sense, mediated, and in some sense necessarily so, criticism refers us to an outside of language, largely by insisting that language is not even the whole of communication, let alone of what is perceptible. The process of infinite reflection which so intrigued the Romantic philosophers returns in Viola's work, but now, especially in the engagement with death and the traverse of meanings across subjectivity and between subjects in the activity of mourning, that infinite reflection is not adduced as the property of the individual subject, but of the social, since the critic claims, immodestly, a right to reinterpret (and intimates the impossibility of doing otherwise). Communication becomes then the play of the species, more and more so in a globalized economy, a secular open field that goes on despite our own deaths.

6. Death intervenes in the communicative process, as a full stop. But it is just that full stop that is also the necessary void against which communications speak, which form the ground out of which the figures of our communicative world are projected, and which propels us into 'speech', in every medium, both as the reaction against the deaths of others, and as a crying out against our own deaths. The grand absurdity is that it is only in death that communication is freed from human subjectivity as socially constructed, from social instrumentality as historically constructed, and achieves the possibility of autonomy which alone can secure a future in a culture whose intellectuals, increasingly, deny that a future is possible.

7. The alternating success and failure of individuation is not just a clock for measuring time passing: it is the pledge that individuality itself may pass, and therefore that the Idealist problematic is a historical one. Working within history, within time, materially, is a critical beginning of work to help that loosening of the bonds of individuality in the interests of a communication whose rationality need no longer be presumed, and which therefore is not condemned to the irrational obverse of reason. The secular model and metaphor – *jouissance* – is weakening because it presumes the centrality of individuated sex which our culture lauds (and whose impossibility Lacan foreshadows). It is always worth looking where the culture hates to look to find what really propels it. Then, perhaps, deconstructing the binary of sex and death, we can begin to understand their dialectic

8. Such thoughts arise in the context of an artistic discourse, in the sense of one which, despite institutional funding, takes its formal and technical premises from sources other than the mainstream of media productions. Criticism of the dominant tends to lead towards theory;

interpretation of the offbeat tends towards criticism. This does not mean abandoning the popular, but putting it in its place. If communication is considered as an ecology, then diversity, the mark of its health, is enabled, one route among many, through such a critical dialogue with the avant garde.

The Passing is available from Film and Video Umbrella, 2 Rugby St. London WC1. Tel: 0171-8317753

Reflections on the dispossessed: video and the 'Challenge for Change' experiment

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*Once the dispossessed and powerless have access to the means of
information they can no longer be misled by Establishment bullshit
And that is in itself a revolution.*

Patrick Watson¹

¹ Patrick Watson, 'Challenge for
Change' *ArtsCanada* (April 1970)
p. 20

While empowering 'ordinary people', the camcorder is revolutionizing television – so the rhetoric goes. Breaking down the division between the institutionalized power of broadcast television and the private viewing space of the home, between producer and consumer, home video television (HVTV) or 'reality-TV' is said to do away with the glamour of stars, big budget serials and special effects in favour of real people and actual events (recorded by real people and their camcorders). Whether it is the domestic mishap, the urban crime or the natural disaster, HVTV is popular family entertainment. Without a doubt, especially in the US, the camcorder is changing the face of prime-time television, reconfiguring the complex relay of looks that previously distinguished the contours of information and entertainment.

Two recent documentaries produced for Channel Four in Britain address this 'revolution'. Their different verdicts are evident from their titles, *Channels of Resistance: Television Tactics* (Andy Porter and Tony Dowmunt, 1993) and *Videos, Vigilantes and Voyeurism* (Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, 1993). Both films survey the ambiguous terrain of capitalist culture, analysing the role of the camcorder within

a satellite world and a mediatized experience of everyday life. While *Channels of Resistance* sees camcorders as democratizing communication, helping to foster alternative information networks by enabling the self-representation of diverse cultural and political groups, *Videos, Vigilantes and Voyeurism* focuses on the way they are being used to commodify the lifeworld, breaking down the ethical boundaries of human privacy and assisting state surveillance. Resistance to state censorship versus pornographic surveillance, self-expression versus incorporation, democracy versus capitalism – these are, perhaps, the torn halves of the video revolution. These torn halves, as Adorno might have it, are the burden of modernity. Yet before we accept this cultural condition, which all too often transforms ambiguity and contradiction into simple oppositions (mass culture/ community communication or broadcast television/the camcorder), we should consider the metamorphosis of this revolution.

Democratic extension

Raymond Williams has cautioned with great wisdom against the determinism – either technological or economic – that underpins the discourses of scientific and cultural revolution. Such discourses conceal the complex interpenetration of socioeconomic context and technical innovation or discovery. For Williams, the economic development of a technology and the transformations it brings about cannot be understood separately, but are mutually determining. In particular, Williams is critical of the formalist theories of Marshall McLuhan for whom each technological innovation is the natural result of earlier states of civilization.² Nevertheless, it is the technological determinism at the heart of McLuhan's writings on the media that, for my purposes, make his work useful. This is especially true when it comes to analysing the interactive utopias and the notions of viewer participation, sovereignty and access that are currently all the rage (and revolution) in the popular media, from HVTV to cybersex.

McLuhan's work embraces the scientific rationality and the liberal democratic projects that have come, in part, to define technological modernity. His imploding 'global village', that 'centre without margins', reflects the discourses of development and progress which seek to make the world smaller, that culture which Williams calls 'the culture of distance'.³ Against all the sociological claims in the 1950s and 1960s that television was turning viewers into passive zombies, McLuhan contended that it was inaugurating new forms of interactivity and participation. Television's 'inclusive image', according to him, supersedes the 'mere viewpoint', the detached knowing, of print culture. It invites 'do-it-yourself participation' in a process (not product) where everyone 'experiences far more than he understands'.⁴ Electronic communication as total environment breaks

² Raymond Williams, *Television Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974) pp. 134–7.

³ In Alan O'Connor (ed.), *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989) p. 13.

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964) p. 318.

down the earlier divisions between producer and consumer, public and private, peoples and nations, bodies and machines – those distinctions dictated by the industrial age. Stubbornly disregarding the political economy of cultural technologies, McLuhan alleged that this globalizing process, the unifying effects of technology, would not render the world more uniform but amplify uniqueness and diversity. McLuhan, the Catholic humanist, had faith that the decentralizing forces of the information revolution would democratize and equalize communication, leading to the ultimate harmony of all being. That is, to a collective social consciousness and universal understanding:

As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we are in theirs, thanks to the electric media.⁵

Despite this new social involvement, it is telling that the distinction between McLuhan's 'we' and 'the Negro, the teen-ager and some other groups' remains intact – indeed, contained. Despite the participatory realities enabled by electronic communication, difference (the difference between 'our lives' and 'theirs') rather than being a process of exchange, is processed to be exchanged. This last point is crucial. For though McLuhan was far from being a nationalist, his understanding of difference – processed and unified through technology – would be an instrumental part of the Canadian nationalism fostered by Pierre Trudeau's Liberals in the 1960s and 1970s.

It is to Canada and the context of bicultural and multicultural federalism that I now turn. Within this context, I shall consider one of the first community experiments with the video portapak that sought to give a 'voice to the voiceless'.⁶ Often heralded as the genesis of the video revolution, it is a project that, steeped in McLuhan's technological positivism, relied implicitly on the infamous decree 'the medium is the message'.

Challenge for Change

1967 was an important year for Canada. As a centennial celebration of confederation, Expo 67 (Montréal) saw the convergence of technology and nationalism as never before. Imax, the largest screen in the world, could, we were told, only have been invented in Canada. The spectacular five screen cinematic feat, devised by the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) Unit B, epitomized the image of

5 Ibid p 5

6 This, along with mirror machine 'media for the people', 'media mediator', 'media demystification' media mirror were the rallying slogans in the Challenge for the Change/Société nouvelle newsletter Access (1968–75)

nationhood technological mastery, natural abundance and an open multi-accented democratic participation. Its theme, in the Unit B tradition, was the wonder of human life. Cognitive and technological development were harmoniously synchronized in a symphony dedicated to McLuhan's favourite metaphor, the labyrinth. The United Nations theme of the fair '*Terre des hommes*/Man and his World' announced official bilingualism and 'the multicultural Canada in a multinational world' promoted by the Liberal government.⁷ This was Canada, the modern nation. As Arthur Kroker has explained:

Canada is and always has been, the most modern of the new world societies because of the character of its colonialism; of its domination of the land by technologies of communication; and of its imposition of an abstract nation upon a divergent population by a fully technical polity; this has made of it a leading expression of technological liberalism in North America.⁸

1967 also saw the birth of a new programme at the NFB, 'Challenge for Change'. Initiated with subsidies from seven government departments, the programme gained almost instant international recognition. Much like Imax, it reinforced the image of Canada as an advanced democratic nation. The project's aims were simple: give the disenfranchised and marginal communities of Canada a voice by giving them access to the media (film, and later Super-8, video and cable television). This was intended 'to improve communications, create greater understanding, promote new ideas and provoke social change' mostly around poverty.⁹ By the time the programme began to lose momentum (it began to lose government subsidies due to fiscal restraint) in the mid 1970s, it had produced hundreds of films and videos, and hundreds of hours of non-edited 'process' videos.

Although Challenge for Change defies simple evaluation (not only are there differences between the English and Québécois programme, *Société nouvelle*, but between the various projects within each programme)¹⁰ I wish to draw attention to a particular teleology at its core. One that came to dictate the way video was used as a 'mirror machine' for the people: implementing non-hierarchical forms of authority and consolidating the identity of difference. I am especially interested in the way 'media for the people' exhibited a highly instrumental view of cultural development. D.B. Jones has pointed out that this view reflected the Liberal's two-fold policy to democratize and regionalize culture, and Challenge for Change on the whole shared in this strategy: a strategy largely aimed at integrating the margins into the mainstream of Canadian life.¹¹

Unit B director Colin Low, heavily involved in the Imax sensation, would pioneer the participatory techniques that gained Challenge for Change its reputation as one of the cornerstones of the alternative media movement. The participatory process was conceived as a means

7 Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991) pp. 162–8.

8 Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind* (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1984), p. 83.

9 Dorothy Hénaut, 'The "Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle" experience' in Nancy Thede and Alain Ambrosi (eds), *Video the Changing World* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1991) p. 49.

10 The Québécois counterpart to the project was set up in 1969. Growing out of *Le groupe de recherches sociales* (1966–9) whose members included Robert Forget, Claude Jutra and Fernand Dansereau, *Société nouvelle* placed far less emphasis on process film and video. The French programme included very interesting experiments with narrative such as Leonard Forest's *La noce est pas finie* (1971) written and acted by a group of Acadians in New Brunswick.

11 D.B. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: The National Film Board of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1981) pp. 171–2.

to counter both the objectification of earlier ethnographic approaches and the aestheticism of an emerging auteurist tendency at the NFB (mainly in Québec).

The Challenge for Change pilot film, Tanya Ballantyne's *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) lacked an essential political imperative. The cinema-verite portrait of a poverty-stricken family in Montréal, while sensitive, only reinforced the hopelessness and futility of the family's situation. Moreover, the family's sense of powerlessness was heightened when, without their being notified, the film was aired on local television. They were subjected to ridicule by neighbours and eventually had to move.

In the aftermath of *The Things I Cannot Change*, an ethical dimension was incorporated into the documentary process. For Low and others, the Challenge for Change film would seek to 'engage the people on the screen as partners in the filmmaking process'.¹² Thus the aims of a project could no longer be subsumed to the self-expression of an individual director. Turning away from his earlier formal inclinations (*Corral* [1954], *Universe* [1960], *Circle of the Sun* [1961]), Low resolved to break 'the illusion that *I* can communicate through film – that *my* films can communicate, that *I* am effecting social change'.¹³ Rather than making films about disadvantaged groups, he sought to make films *with* them. This approach presented an alternative to the paternalistic and authoritarian mandate of Grierson's NFB: 'to interpret Canada to Canadians and to the rest of the world and to make films in the national interest' (while diminishing sectionalist tendencies and regional differences). Challenge for Change would confront the NFB's technocratic elitism, seeking to transform the government-sponsored film into a public platform for the people.

Participant observer

The first prototype films were produced in 1967 on Fogo Island, just off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. For long-time Challenge for Change worker Dorothy Hénaut, the principles informing what has since been called the 'Fogo process' would be fundamental to the development of 'a community process, media by the community'.¹⁴ Low's notion of subject participation paralleled the liberal interpretation of cultural development, 'to help them help themselves', and would play an essential role in the state promotion of community culture in Canada.

Unable to sustain their livelihoods due to the corporatization of the fishing industries, the five thousand islanders who made up the different communities on Fogo were about to be relocated by the government. Despite their geographical isolation from each other, they were collectively resisting the relocation. To increase communication

¹² Dorothy Hénaut, 'Powerful catalyst' *Access*, vol. 7 (Winter, 1971–72) p. 3

¹³ Cited in Sandra Gwyn, *Film Videotape and Social Change: A Report on the Seminar Organized by the Extension Service, 13–14th March* (St John's Newfoundland Memorial University, 1972), p. 12

¹⁴ Cited in Peter K. Wiesner, 'Media for the people: the Canadian experiments with film and video in community development' *American Review of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1992) p. 69

between the communities and not to impose his own interpretation on their views, needs and histories, Low opted to film interviews with different members from each community. The members not only chose the topics they discussed but they viewed the rushes afterwards, and could omit any material that did not properly reflect them. Often the interviews were screened to other island communities and Low would record their reactions, creating a series of metaobservational or 'feedback' documents.

- 15 *Children of Fogo* (1967), *The Winds of Fogo* (1969) and the follow-up film *A Memo from Fogo* (1972) are circulated as general interest films for the public

Refusing to make an overall film about the Island,¹⁵ Low produced what he called 'vertical' films. Somewhat akin to the home-movie archive, vertical films consisted of one community event, *Jim Decker's Party* (5 min.), an everyday occurrence, *The Mercer Family* (10 min.) or an interview discussing one issue, *Tom Best on Cooperatives* (10 min.). Editing was kept to a minimum and intercutting between people on the basis of issues was eliminated altogether. This practice, according to Low, functioned to keep the filmmaker's interventions and value judgments to a minimum, facilitating a more self-directed community expression and democratic communication.¹⁶

- 16 Gwyn, *Film, Videotape and Social Change*, p. 5. Hénaut, 'Powerful catalyst', pp. 3–7

While anthropology's participant observation seeks to resolve power relations by positioning the observer inside the field to be investigated, the Fogo process side-stepped power altogether. It inscribed not a self-reflexive gaze, one that takes account of the observer's contradictory status of belonging, but a self-reflective observation that eliminated the idea of an outside. Using film, participants could observe their own behaviour on the screen *a posteriori*. Low theorized that the media – film and, as we shall see, especially video – could be made to function as a collective mirror. As Grierson put it, the Challenge for Change film enabled communities 'to view themselves,



The community watches itself.
VTR *Rosedale* (1970). Photo:
Dorothy Hénaut

17 John Grierson 'Memo to Michelle about decentralizing the means of production', *Access* vol 8 (Spring 1972) p 5

18 Colin Low 'Media as mirror', *Access* vol 10 (Winter 1973), p 3

19 Grierson 'Memo to Michelle' p 4

20 John Corner 'Mediating the ordinary: the 'access' idea and television form' in N. Hewitt et al (eds), *Access and Control: US and British Broadcasting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming)

21 Jones, *Movies and Memoranda*, p 168

discover their strengths and bring their ideas to better order'.¹⁷ Thus what came to matter was not so much the final product but the use of media 'as a sparkplug for process'.¹⁸ Aimed at strengthening community communication, the process involved building consensus and advocacy around particular issues.

Historically, the participatory approach to documentary filmmaking is not a stylistic but an ethical engagement with the processes of representation. At the very least, it entails some involvement with and accountability to those lives that are being depicted. It is a mode of gathering information that can produce very different results and is certainly no guarantee of political acumen. As a methodology, it enabled the staged realities of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) to gain ethnographic currency, just as it was fundamental to the tenement dwellers' direct address in Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton's *Housing Problems* (1935). Indeed, Grierson often claimed that *Housing Problems* was the precursor to *Challenge for Change*, calling it a film produced 'not *about* people but *with* them'.¹⁹ Yet, as John Corner has recently observed, the dwellers' direct address often appears awkward and forced. For Corner, this 'curious and even disturbing formality' may be read as 'an acknowledgement of the real social context of the communicative act being performed'.²⁰ It is this formality, the tension of enactment, the tension between the social actors on the screen and the frame exacted by the filmmakers, that *Challenge for Change* sought to eradicate. When participation became linked with access – 'engaging the people on the screen as partners' – it became synonymous with stylistic transparency.

Subject participation in the *Challenge for Change* film was determined by an ethical rejection of style in favour of direct speech. The twenty-eight films produced on Fogo embodied a dominant aesthetic trope – or anti-aesthetic – that would come to characterize a majority of *Challenge for Change* films and videos: the talking head or the talking head viewing the talking head. D.B. Jones has commented on this:

as if, in the words of Guy Glover, 'simple quotation were the only guarantee of veracity'. Ironically, the self-expression that Grierson had abhorred, and which he noticed in some of the Board's work when he visited Montréal in 1964, and which *Challenge for Change* had meant to counteract, was re-emerging. Only it wasn't the filmmakers who were expressing themselves, it was 'the people'. *Challenge for Change*, which sprang in part as a recoil from the aesthetics of self-expression, got rid of aesthetics, but not the self-expression.²¹

While subject participation was intended to counter the ethnographer's distant gaze, it was being delimited in terms of the filmmaker's detachment from the processes of representation.

This kind of detachment, or 'self-effacement before reality' to

22 André Bazin, *Evolution of the language of cinema* in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1 trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press) p. 29

23 In Louis Marcorelles *Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Filmmaking* (New York: Praeger, 1968) p. 7

borrow Bazin's description of the neo-realist project, was already discernible in Unit B's *Candid Eye* series in the late 1950s.²² The *Candid Eye* project (1958–1961) had pioneered the use of light weight sync-sound equipment to produce documentaries about Canadian life for television. Favoursing a more dynamic penetration of the everyday both in terms of production and distribution, the aim, as Wolf Koenig put it, was 'to show . . . the films on television to millions of people and make them see that life is true, fine and full of meaning'.²³ Produced without scripts, *Candid Eye* films eschewed the controlled actualities of Grierson's expository cinema. Several years before Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) and *Primary* (1960) by the *Drew Associates*, *Candid Eye* films like *The Days Before Christmas* (1958), *Blood and Fire* (1958) and *The Back-Breaking Leaf* (1959) introduced location sound recording and a direct cinema style: outwardly rough and structurally loose.

The *Candid Eye* series culminated in *Lonely Boy* (Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroiter, 1962), an ironic portrait of Canadian performer Paul Anka. The film's unfocused shots, haphazard framing (which often includes the microphone), erratic camera movements, jump-cuts and loud background noises would become signifiers of direct cinema's unregulated form: evidence that the director is not in control of the event being recorded. By revealing the limits of visibility, direct cinema's reflexivity overrides the director's authority and stresses, in its place, the technological mediation of the event. This heightens the impression of objectivity because the event is seemingly rendered through a technological seeing that is without intentionality: a candid eye. Thus, the cinematic apparatus becomes nothing more than a recording device, a candid camera concealing nothing, present for all to see. The direct cinema film, then, stands as a record, a mirror image of the pro-filmic event which includes the process of its recording. The event recorded persists as the locus of textual authority, the source of the image's meaning. In the case of *Lonely Boy*, this effect was cleverly manipulated by the directors to underline the discursive construction of the star's media 'image'.

Overall, the *Candid Eye* films were about ordinary people and everyday occurrences – consumers before Christmas, tobacco pickers in Ontario, Salvation Army workers. Although Low was not directly involved in the *Candid Eye* programme, its influence on him and on *Challenge for Change* is unmistakable. The *Candid Eye*'s empiricism, its humanist emphasis on the prosaic, its foregrounding of process as well as its overall refusal to narrativize can all be detected in *Challenge for Change*. Significantly, *Challenge for Change* inherits from the work of Unit B the political ambiguity that Peter Harcourt has described as: 'the quality of suspended judgement, of something left open at the end, of something undecided . . . something rather detached from the immediate pressures of existence, something apart'. This characteristic distance – which Harcourt calls a 'boyish sense of

- 24 Peter Harcourt, 'The innocent eye' *Sight and Sound*, vol. 33 (Winter 1964-5) p. 21

wonder' – can be interpreted as a desire to engage more fully with life, to allow the poetic ambiguities of reality to find expression.²⁴ While Challenge for Change and Colin Low might have set out to counter Unit B's detachment 'from the immediate pressures of existence', it is this very detachment, 'the quality of suspended judgment', that it reproduced. This would become most apparent with the introduction of video.

Video

From 1969 onwards, video became the technology of choice for the participatory practice. Not only was it cost effective but it could, ostensibly, provide an automatic – instantaneous and simultaneous – record, a mirror machine that needed no operator. Hénaut recalls:

an aspect of the process was bothering us. These people were dependent on our equipment and goodwill – in short, our own power – for access to the instruments of communication. As intermediaries, we were nevertheless cumbersome. If we really believed in people's right to express themselves directly, then we needed to eliminate ourselves from the process and find a way to put the media directly in the hands of citizens.

Fortunately, a half-inch portable video called 'portapak' was released onto the market in 1968.²⁵

- 25 Hénaut, 'The Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle experience', p. 49

Video redefined the film director's role. No longer an authorial agent, the director became a social animator whose chief function was to provide technical training to select communities. In the late 1960s and



Community action video at Metro Media (1971). Photo: Jan Clemson

early 1970s, several video access centres were set up across Canada (Vidéographe, Trinity Square, Metro Media and Teled) to encourage community culture and communication of which video linked to cable television was the central feature.

Time and again, video is reported to have been greeted with tremendous excitement by different communities. The VTR 'brought the community together' and the television monitor (even if it was closed-circuit) resonated with institutional authority, promising a new form of social communication. Able to transcend the mediated facets of film production, video's technical accessibility enabled citizens 'to express themselves directly'. Shattering the traditional hierarchies of power implemented by the interview as a formal structure, community members could employ video to interview themselves. Group discussions were to become the dominant representational paradigm for the democratic communication enabled by video – the disembodied authority behind the camera seemingly absent from the process.²⁶

VTR Rosedale (1970), a film documenting the use of video and the Fogo process in the rural community of Rosedale, Alberta, echoes this enthusiasm. Community development officer Anton Karch trained the Rosedale Citizens Action Committee to use video with the aim of assessing community needs. The film's soft-spoken female voiceover tells how the citizens interviewed by the committee were able to watch themselves immediately after on the playback monitor: 'they were impressed by how clearly they had expressed themselves'. Cut to a town meeting where the edited version of the interviews, which include watching the playback, are presented to the community and videotaped once again. Here, the utilization of video to implement the Fogo process produces an astounding observational regress: a displacement of the apprehending gaze which screens and deflects relations of power. The modalities of power inherent in the process

²⁶ Anton Karch, 'VTR in Drumheller, Alberta', *Access*, vol. 7 (Winter 1971–2), p. 10



The community both the subject and object of knowing. *VTR Rosedale* (1970). Photo: Dorothy Hénaut

become less and less tangible as the frame appears to open forever outward. There is no outside, no semiotic interference to the mimetic process upon which identity construction depends. The refracted gaze makes the community both the subject and the object of knowing. This observational paradigm at once mirrors and obliterates *VTR Rosedale's* institutional framework: the government-sponsored programme becomes a community initiative. As with direct cinema, the impression prevails that the communication technology is unregulated; it is merely a recording apparatus servicing the community.

While Imax sought to answer the nineteenth-century quest to overcome the exclusion of the spectator from the image, the video portapak promised to overcome the viewer's exclusion from television. The same technological determinism pledged an interactivity in the form of an immediate and empowering transport from the mundane disconnected experience of the everyday to the social nexus of the screen. Fostering processes of equivalency and unification, this engagement would multiply the order of meaning and, as McLuhan theorized, move the world, or at least Canada, towards universal harmony.

Yet the interactivity and participation that video delivered instituted access without agency. It instituted a particular form of self-surveillance rather than transforming the actual institutional relations of production and knowledge. If empowerment came from demythologizing the technological and social institutions of television by the very fact that anyone could be on television, that television could be used to make a difference, then it also served to reinforce the difference television makes. Video projected television's generalized fantasy of transparency, immediacy and extension through that contradictory bifurcation of *being on television*. Most of the community experiments with video never went beyond this initial positivism, beyond this social reproduction.

Community videos produced through Challenge for Change, although emerging from a diversity of communities, tended to look the same. According to Challenge for Change producer Boyce Richardson, the problem with the portapak was that its 'easy to operate' facade did not encourage anyone actually to learn or experiment with its use. Instead, black and white 'glitchy' images, unfocused and barely edited, were glorified as 'a manifestation of honesty and directness'.²⁷ Videographic reality appeared to have an ontological edge over film; video, unlike the chemical processing needed for film, was a *tape recording* able to 'feedback', to mirror, the reality of difference directly.

In this way, the formal characteristics of community video were delineated in opposition to art and to the mediating subjectivity of the auteur. Video was an antidote to indeterminacy; the more ordinary and transparent, the more authentic. Community video and television

²⁷ Cited in Alexander McHugh, *Report on the Current Status of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle Program*, March 31 (Montréal: National Film Board of Canada Archive, 1980), p. 19

were intended – were funded – to provide a document of community experience and need, increasing the internal coherence of the community. Though ‘process’ video was supposed to work against any finished product, ultimately its goal was ‘to bring ideas to better order’. Ron Burnett has suggested that when Challenge for Change videos were produced for target audiences, community expression emerged as a *product* of ordered discourse, a voice ‘packaged’ into ‘an effect for others’.²⁸ The ‘authentic’ expression of community was made to replicate the instrumental discourses of the state. More often than not, community video was synonymous with the transparency and certainty of public service information

²⁸ Ron Burnett, ‘Video/film from communication to community’ in Thede and Ambrosi (eds), *Video the Changing World*, p. 59

Processing difference

Foucault has encapsulated the power/knowledge problematic in the following way: ‘we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth’.²⁹ The equation of community video with public service information is not surprising since the very cohesion of those community identities – dispossessed, black, native, working mothers, the welfare class – was constituted by the state in the first place. The institutionalization of cultural difference defines the project of multiculturalism not only to manage and integrate difference, but to make it at once separate and identical. This construction creates a common otherness, the ‘people’, whose solidarity is made impossible under the burden of difference.

Here, the ‘people’ or the ‘community’ are defined negatively by exclusion, by the participation, wealth and access to power that they do not have. John Frow has argued that the reduction of difference to an ‘antagonistic duality’ (people/state or community/society) cannot ‘break the cycle of power because it is never more than its mirror image’. It will only produce ‘a repetition of the Same’ as difference.³⁰ The category of the people, Frow maintains is a ‘fact of representation, rather than an external cause of representation’. Similarly, he rejects the concept of ‘the popular’ because it is theorized in relation to this ‘singular entity’. The ‘strategic value’ of these terms is found in the way they maintain dominant perceptions of how cultural space is organized and valued: ‘the point is to describe this normative function rather than accept it as given’.³¹

Challenge for Change sought to enlarge the public sphere to include voices marginalized by and excluded from civic discourse. Certainly, this project was extremely important to the inception and growth of Canada’s alternative video culture, for both art and community video production. Yet to what extent was the culture produced through the programme limited to fulfilling a binary conception of media by the

²⁹ Michel Foucault ‘Two lectures’ in Colin Gordon (ed and trans) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books 1980) p. 93

³⁰ John Frow, ‘The concept of the popular’ *New Formations*, no. 18 (Winter 1992), p. 30

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3

people? To what degree were established structures of authority recognized and challenged?

Infused with radical aspirations for the new media that characterized the late 1960s, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's landmark essay 'Constituents of a theory of the media' (1970) proposed a socialist strategy – a cultural revolution – that would do away with 'the contradiction between producers and consumers'. The 'emancipatory potential' of the media were to be 'released' from the grips of capitalist production. Correspondingly, 'the masses' needed to 'organize themselves' and use 'the new productive forces' to 'secure evidence of their daily experiences and draw effective lessons from them'.³² Although sympathetic to Enzensberger's political aims, John Hartley has criticized his proposal for maintaining an implicit distinction between the 'vanguard intellectual' and the 'masses':

Enzensberger's notion of the 'masses' is contradictory, wanting them to be active and self-determining, but only if such action is organized along existing political lines, to support existing (socialist) strategies, and only if it is *mass*. Evidence that populations are not masses, and that the new media technologies suffuse popular culture in ways that challenge socialist orthodoxies, is dismissed as the result of corporate manipulation, leaving a view of the masses as, by default, passive, depoliticized and in need of organization.³³

Certainly far less radical in its scope than Enzensberger's proposal, Challenge for Change suffers from a similar contradiction. The voice of change must emanate from the community which is 'in need of organization'. The participatory process was intended to overcome this contradiction. Yet this process – the Fogo process, the process of enabling a community to come to voice, the process of putting the media directly in the hands of the community – could not challenge an authority that it worked to obscure. Instead, the Fogo process consolidated a version of community identity largely determined by the directives of liberal reform.

One of the main criticisms of Challenge for Change has been that it worked to defuse direct action, to contain and stabilize, as television can do, the potentially explosive effects of difference. It is well known that Trudeau's bicultural and multicultural policies were implemented to dissipate the burgeoning forces of the separatist movement in Quebec as well as the increasing demands of Canada's diverse ethnic and native communities. It is easy to see how Challenge for Change is entangled in that web of coercion and consent, technologies of domination and technologies of the self, which define the functioning of power in the liberal democratic state. As Chantal Mouffe has remarked, liberalism must continually deny its own limits in order to maintain political legitimacy, its foundation in civil society.³⁴ Discourses of access and participation often work to conceal the

³² Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a theory of the media', *New Left Review* no. 64 (1970) pp. 14–23.

³³ John Hartley *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.

³⁴ Chantal Mouffe, 'The limits of liberalism'. Talk given at the Institute for Social Research, Essex University (March 1993).

institutional conditions of access and the political limits of coming to voice.

Yet in times of crisis, limits do become apparent. At the height of Challenge for Change in 1970, the Liberal government imposed the War Measures Act on Québec. Arresting citizens without due process and censoring the media to protect the Québec population from the threats of FLQ (*Front de la libération du Québec*) terrorism. The video portapak was used by the government for the monitoring and surveillance purposes that directed its original design.

The people's authority

The people harboured a new empiricism for the NFB: an amateur culture whose seeing was without intentionality, a neutral ground of everyday truth, totally transparent and uninformed. Video was the amateur technology par excellence. This might explain why many of the people (and the NFB in general) lost interest in making videos, getting involved, instead, in authoring film. This is why also, until recently, art video and community video have been mutually exclusive terms. Video artists have had to distinguish their work as art – video art – by linking it with the non-utilitarian concerns and institutions of high art in order to procure funding. Video activism, especially around AIDS and women's health care issues, is changing and challenging this historical distinction. Funding for the arts and subsidies for community culture, traditionally separate bodies in Canada, are also being redefined. Agencies are being made to rethink the ideologies which have defined art in modernist terminology and community in terms of development and preservation, that is, craft.

While Challenge for Change served as a model for thinking about community television around the world, it was a model that failed in Canada. There are countless reasons for the individual failures in Thunder Bay, Vancouver, Roosevelt Park and Winnipeg. Yet one principal impediment to the success of community television rested in Challenge for Change's neo-liberal interpretation of community development. As the following report indicates

The emerging pattern, if one examines the generation of projects beginning with Fogo, is that of gradual withdrawal from active social intervention in specific communities to a policy of provision of service and information.³⁵

This 'emerging pattern' reflects the technological determinism at the very heart of the programme: the ahistorical conflation of new communication technologies with democratic participation. It is not surprising that cable television was introduced to various communities as a service. The economic and institutional interests that fuelled this service were overshadowed by the Film Board's euphoria of access

³⁵ Elizabeth Van Every Taylor and James Taylor, *Using Video Technology for Social Change: a Framework for the Generation, Selection Operationalization and Evaluation of CC/SN Video Projects* A Report Submitted to the Interdepartmental Committee for Change/Société nouvelle (Montreal: University of Montreal, 1973) p. 68

and participation, a rhetoric supported by the public service history of television in Canada.

Though encouraged by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in the early 1970s to open time slots for community programming, only one third of the cable companies in Canada actually did.³⁶ Moreover, cable managers and owners were free to impose ideological and stylistic restrictions on community productions. Except in Québec, where community television has enjoyed some success, no state funding has ever been made available for community access television. Despite numerous proposals for community-controlled cable systems, community access to television has taken place through privately owned commercial broadcasting channels.³⁷ Though not without problems, the model has been far more successful in the USA. The foundation of an advocacy association for public access and community programming on cable television, the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, has sustained a strong cablecast network.

I would like to conclude by returning to what US television networks, using the democratic discourses of community cable, are describing as home video television (*America's Funniest Home Videos*, *I-Witness*, *Eye-Spy*, *Code 3* and so on). By virtue of its very nomination, home video television appears to transcend the institutional boundaries of network television. The truth value of home video television depends on its non-institutional character, its authority is derived from its non-authority. It is no accident that home video television gains momentum just when new technologies are enabling more viewer control over television. Importantly, it materializes just after the Gulf War made apparent the limits of television as an information technology, the limits of television's ability to show us the world. Avital Ronell has suggested that the George Holliday videotape of the Rodney King beating emerges as television's other, its bad conscience, showing precisely what television could not show during the war in the Gulf, lawful brutality and racism.³⁸ In this context, home video on television seems revolutionary, a force – the power of the ordinary citizen – that is liberating television from its institutional constraints, and disclosing the truth.

Home video on television has become HVTV, an inexpensive but highly lucrative new genre. Like the community video fostered by the NFB, the home video fostered by network television, is produced not by authoring subjects but by ordinary viewing audiences. The home viewers urged to send in their videos at the end of each programme are constituted as internally coherent and homogeneous: 'You, the viewing audience'. They are what John Hartley has described as 'invisible fictions'. Negating television's reactive frame, these fictions are 'produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take

36 Frances Berrigan (ed.), *Access: Some Western Models of Community Media* (Paris UNESCO, 1977), p. 87

37 Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: the Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montréal McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990)

38 Avital Ronell, 'Television and the fragility of testimony', *Public*, no. 9 (1994), p. 156

charge of the mechanisms of their own survival'.³⁹ Given the binary nature of the fiction, the home as the inverted space of the institution, HVTV does not disrupt the authority, distance and detachment of the televisual gaze. Rather, it is constituted as its mirror image, legitimizing and extending the marketed mythos of television's omnipotence and interactivity.

HVTV is often linked with public service information around individual safety. Its human interest stories rarely uncover the corrupt workings of power but rather tend to reaffirm the heroic apparatuses of the state (police officers, paramedics, fire fighters). The real-life drama of a mother and child trapped helplessly in a car, suspended precariously over a cliff, calls forth – with great urgency – the reassuring resolution of crisis: an end that comes only with the reinstatement of law and order.

reports and debate:
debates

Media Studies and the 'knowledge problem'

JOHN CORNER

I want to suggest that both teaching and research in Media Studies have a 'knowledge problem' which has recently become more visible and troublesome as a result of uncertainties, tensions and regroupings in the area. All fields of study have knowledge problems of course, and although they vary in the amount of self-consciousness they display about them and their degree of engagement with them, there has been a broad shift towards paying them more attention and making such attention an explicit and central part of study discourse.

Knowledge problems concern what it is that academic inquiries seek to find out, and the kinds and quality of data and of explanatory relations which particular ideas and methods might be expected to produce. In response to them, disciplines not only engage more closely and innovatively with questions of conceptualization and technique, but also develop a reflexive, sceptical sense of their own knowledge production and its vulnerabilities. From some perspectives, this sense may be considered radical, in that those who have it are placed in the position of professional doubters rather than practitioners in relation to the disciplinary project. One effect of the sweep of postmodernist thinking in the humanities and social sciences has undoubtedly been to encourage this latter tendency.

The distinctive character of the problem – or better, the set of problems – which confronts Media Studies is due partly to the history

of this field, partly to the very diverse nature of its object of study, and partly to the particularly ambitious form of interdisciplinarity to which this diversity tends to lead. I am talking primarily about upper case 'Media Studies', a singular noun designating an institutionalized, self-conscious grouping, rather than lower case 'media studies' (studies of the media), a plural designation referencing a broader range of work distributed across humanities, social science and even technological fields.

Media Studies needs to engage with expressive form, social action and social structure. It needs to explore the political and psychological determinants and consequences of media processes, as well as their discursive and technological means. To do this, it necessarily either draws on directly, or else 'shadows' with varying degrees of explicitness, concepts and methods developed in the primary disciplines. How far does it thus constitute itself as a unified project of inquiry? Or how far does it become an *aggregation* of inquiries, which are placed into tighter or looser relationships of contiguity with each other and have greater or lesser levels of mutual awareness and tolerance? If the latter were the case, one would expect the knowledge problems themselves to be an aggregation of the problems confronted by the constitutive disciplines. They would not therefore be addressable at a general level since the field would have no general discourse of inquiry within whose terms it could consider itself. But without such a discourse, what constitutes 'core knowledge' in the area for the purposes of teaching and research training programmes? Such a question has become a very real one for many course planners and others active in institutionalizing (and, indeed, variously assessing) Media Studies.

The particular academic configuration of British Media Studies today is primarily the product of two things. First of all, a certain combination of arts and social science approaches to the analysis of the media, institutionalized in the design and teaching of the interdisciplinary Communication Studies courses of the 1970s. Secondly, the legacy of Structuralist Marxism. North American, Australian, other European and Scandinavian versions of Media Studies vary in the resemblance they bear to this formative mix, but the relationships and interconnections are never quite the same.

The arts and social science combination in Media Studies is essentially one which brings together 'criticism' and 'sociology' as modes of academic knowing. Criticism is a mode privileging *individual perception*, in which knowledge is the product of sustained analytic attention and intellection. It has a direct, informing link with 'opinion' and, indeed, it is 'opinion' rather than 'theory' as such which is its main generator of ideas. That such opinion is, by definition, subjective (often deeply and self-declaredly so) is by no means a drawback to the larger project of intercultural activity (characterized as 'debate') In literary studies, for instance, a

powerfully rendered account of a major novelist may be prized for its 'originality', precisely for the way in which it differs from the interpretations made by other people. In order for it to be acclaimed thus, it is necessary for some assumptions to be made about what is 'there' to be the object of such 'insight', yet this does not mean that the new interpretation has then to be established as dominant in relation to others. Critical knowledge does not contain truth claims requiring supercession or even superordination of this kind.

Sociology, on the other hand, in its classic and defining empirical project, is essentially a mode privileging *method*. However cautiously it relates itself to (or distances itself from) natural science paradigms, the production of knowledge is normatively regulated by the use of procedures which are explicit, in line with intersubjective agreements on validity (even if these are only partial) and able to be replicated by those who wish to 'test' findings. What the procedures produce is, first of all, 'data', and then an analysis and explanation of this data. Both data and the analyses which are made of it (the two should not be confused) have a very different status from 'criticism'. It can be recognized, without thereby succumbing to positivism, that data carries claims to objectivity, however much these claims are qualified by recognition of both the imprecision of the research tools and the 'constructional' dimension of the research concepts themselves. Analytical constructs used in asking questions of data and in attempting to answer them have objectivity obligations as a consequence, however tentative and conditional the honouring of these may be. *Theories*, here, are mostly explanatory propositions, with considerable attention being paid to those which are open to forms of empirical testing and, then, to the bodies of analysed evidence which result.

It is part of the intellectual history of Media Studies in Britain that it was formed, not only out of an increasing recognition of the media's political and cultural significance, but out of a dissatisfaction with both the perceived inability of literary-style analyses of the media to go beyond their textualist boundaries, and the perceived inability of conventional social science to engage with the complexity of meaning-making forms. The most influential perspective for this formation was Cultural Studies, the history of which has recently received a good deal of attention, at the same time as the field of study which is covered by the term has become increasingly subject to institutional variation and plain opportunism.¹ Initially an attempt to push out English Studies (meaning and value) to the point where an interconnection with the Sociology of Culture (structure and practice) could be established, Cultural Studies was soon displaying increased autonomy as an academic (but, at this stage, exclusively research-related) project. The warrant for this autonomy came neither from literary analysis nor social science. It was taken primarily from Structuralist Marxism, with the Althusserian perspective on ideology

¹ The major surveys include Graeme Turner *British Cultural Studies: an Introduction* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), Patrick Bratlinger, *Crusoe's Footprint* (London: Routledge, 1990), and Jim McGugan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

and the social formation as its 'sociology', and semiotics (taken largely from Barthes and Eco) as its 'criticism'. In relation to this broad framing, a Film Studies continued to exist and develop, deriving much of its own identity from its earlier literary and art historical connections. In some institutions this was extended to become Film and Television Studies in a manner which usually (and not unproblematically) continued to privilege the Film Study agenda. The broadest, and perhaps earliest, grouping for undergraduate work was Communication Studies, which often had a strong Cultural Studies element and a core of media work, but which also tended to draw on a wider range of arts and social science perspectives on communication, including those from psychology. The rapid development of Communication Studies in the mid 1970s was in part prompted by the need for polytechnics to design attractive interdisciplinary courses which could draw on a considerable range of staff interests. Alongside these interrelated projects, there remained a Sociology of Mass Communications (updated as Media Sociology), which was still the dominant category by which the systematic study of the media had an *international* identity.² Moreover, despite the growth in Cultural Studies approaches, some of the best research work done in the 1970s was done from within one version or another of a sociological problematic, though very few of the researchers were at that time involved in the construction of a field at undergraduate level.³

If the most significant question for any academic venture concerns the kind of things it wants to find out, then the Media Studies produced within the framework of Cultural Studies worked with an exceptional directness of purpose. It wanted to find out how the media worked to achieve an effective level of ideological closure on contemporary consciousness in a situation of capitalist development where direct control at the point of production and/or consumption was admitted to be far from total. This was its defining problematic, and engagement with it (initially brilliantly suggestive but, one might argue, increasingly prone to repetition and self-confirmation) produced a strongly theoretical- critical discourse linked to a subtle, typologically elaborate scheme for investigating textuality.⁴ The conventional body of social scientific analysis was often deemed to be unsuitable for the new task, being irredeemably flawed both in aims and methods. A conflation of 'empiricism' with 'empirical' too frequently provided the project with that *Other* against which it defined itself epistemologically and politically, reinforcing the tendency to circular reasoning. This did not stop substantial internal rifts on questions of theorization however, quite apart from sustained and cogent criticism from researchers whose own application of Marxism suggested the need for primary attention to be given to the 'political economy' of the media and who strongly contested the increasingly hermetic terms of Cultural Studies' attention to ideology.⁵

The knowledge problems affecting current Media Studies have

- 2 A history of interrelated institutional and research developments in the late 1970s, particularly those relating to the course validations of the Council for National Academic Awards, would be useful. I merely offer a background sketch here. See also Alan Durant 'Noises offscreen: could a crisis of confidence be good for media studies?', *Screen*, vol. 32 no. 4 (1991), pp. 407-28.
- 3 Apart from the continuing work of an older generation of social scientists, including Jay Blumler, Denis McQuail, Jeremy Tunstall and James Halloran, there was the work, among others, of Philip Schlesinger, Michael Tracey, Philip Elliott, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock.
- 4 Here, Hall's stencilled papers from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were the single most influential publications, and often more theoretically cautious than selective quotation of the key formulations might suggest.
- 5 Graham Murdock and Peter Golding at the Leicester Centre for Mass Communication Research were chiefly identified with this position following their article 'For a political economy of mass communications' in R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds), *The Socialist Register 1973* (London: Merlin, 1973). As the Cultural Studies perspective increased in influence through the mid 1970s the terms of their critique became stronger.

therefore to be understood, first of all, as ones relating to a non-unified field in which the very different modes of criticism and sociology have been brought together but, in general, *not integrated*. Indeed, it might be said that in many studies and on many syllabuses they have not yet fully come to terms with each other. Secondly, they have to be understood in relation to a formative period of development which was dominated by debates centred on a Marxist–structuralist paradigm, in which a comprehensive materialist account of media power, independent of non-Marxist modes of study, was seen not only to be in the offing but, indeed, to be already under refinement.

Perhaps more than any other area of institutionalized inquiry, this foundational version of Media Studies has, in effect, been left marooned within the new post-Marxist, post-Structuralist context for political and social debate. One has to be careful with the inflections of ‘post’ here. It is not useful to talk of ‘the collapse of Marxism’ in a way which primarily refers to the dissolution of Communist Eastern Europe but which then smuggles in assumptions about the ‘collapse’ of Marxist theory and analysis. Nevertheless, materialist theory itself has had to adapt (sometimes quite radically) to changed historical circumstances and to an intellectual context increasingly aggressive towards it. Even the terms of the Political Economy perspective, robustly historical and empirical though they were, have received adjustment and may well receive more.⁶ Theories of ideology have virtually disappeared from the media research agenda altogether, though not from the undergraduate syllabus, where their gloomy diagnoses are sometimes to be found in bizarre combination with the cheerful populism which has become a more recent perspectival option.

An often ambivalent, running engagement with postmodernism has provided Media Studies with one avenue for the continuation, beyond Structuralist Marxism, of a semi-autonomous (and self-defining) critical discourse. However, there has been a discernible shift away from unifying high theory, a shift which has revealed more strongly the character of Media Studies as a divided field, running an arts and social science project together in ways which are often uneasy. No longer able to afford itself the luxury of devising its problems to fit already available solutions, it has been returned to a re-engagement with those discipline-based knowledge problems from which it once aspired to autonomy. Nowhere is this more true than in the rise of ethnography (both productional and consumptional) as a mode of media inquiry. Although an element in early Cultural Studies, it was only in the mid 1980s that ethnography started to become a defining approach, displacing textual analysis in research if not in teaching. Ethnography initially promised a way of looking at ideological reproduction ‘from the sharp end’,⁷ but it quite quickly modulated into being the methodological correlative of a more general shift from a primary concern with researching ‘power’ to either an emphasis on

6 The continuing case for ‘Political Economy’ is updated in Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, ‘Culture, communications and political economy’ in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society* (London: Arnold, 1991). See also Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communications* (London: Sage, 1990), particularly his introductory essay, which as well as reflecting on recent theoretical developments also argues against those tendencies which cut the field off from the main stream of social science (p. 2).

7 David Morley seems to have been the first to use the idea of ‘ethnography’ as an indication of the *kind* of approach required, in his highly original CCCS stencilled paper ‘Reconceptualising the media audience’ (1974).

'resistance' or an expanded, contextualizing interest in the way in which media meanings are articulated within the terms of the 'everyday', the multiple lifeworlds of society. As researchers soon became aware, whilst it could be innovatively applied to the researching of media meanings, ethnographic inquiry carried with it a long history of methodological debate, both in sociology and anthropology. Indeed, many of the inquiries into audience interpretation which have been undertaken in the last decade are radically *misdescribed* as 'ethnography', since their relationship to researched subjects and to data is often very different from that of the broader tradition.⁸ These inquiries often (and justifiably) have a particularity of research focus around mediated meanings which makes them, by comparison, 'narrow' and even 'shallow' in their specifically ethnographical engagement.

Ethnographic work has typically run into two related kinds of problem as an academic project. It can slip into *descriptivism*, rendering even thicker accounts of process but being unable to make any clear connection upwards to explanation because of a gravitational commitment to ground-level phenomena. It can also suffer from an *empiricism* whereby this commitment makes it lose sight of its own constructed, authorial character. In recent work, a third problem can be discerned – largely a product of postmodernist influence. This is an over-correction of empiricism where the self-consciousness of the researcher is raised to the point at which interest in the researcher–method–subject relationship begins to displace interest in the researched subject itself. The first and the third of these tendencies are now discernible within the new media ethnography.

Put simply, then, a post-Marxist Media Studies has been substantially shorn of those intellectual features which gave the field a degree of unity. It has been returned to a multiple knowledge problematic which draws extensively on the problems of established disciplines and then adds to them issues of combination and adaptation. Its general theories of ideological function, and the contexts of social formation and historical trajectory within which these were set, have been exposed to radical doubt (the recent upsurge of interest in the ideas of Anthony Giddens, whose conceptualizations of structure and agency have been receiving intensive debate in Sociology for well over a decade, is just one sign of current theoretical reorientation).⁹ The mode of textual analysis around which a large part of the field organized itself – semiotics – has received a general theoretical questioning as well as increasingly being seen to fail in generating significant and original substantive analyses. The push out to 'ethnography', while it has produced some excellent work, is in grave danger of running into the doldrums as theoretical uncertainties reduce the consequentiality of its data or it becomes obsessed with its own authorialism.

There is yet another factor, an 'opportunity' carrying the possibility

⁸ These issues have been brought out more fully in Virginia Nightingale, 'What's ethnographic about ethnographic audience research?', *Australian Journal of Communication* no 16, (1989) pp 50–63

⁹ Giddens' ideas figure strongly in Graham Murdock's recent and useful survey of the media and modernity in 'Communications and the constitution of modernity' *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 15 no 4 (1993), pp 521–39

10 This is commented on in Durant, 'Could a crisis of confidence be good for media studies?' Durant's polemical discussion engages with many important points concerning the development of media education, doing so from a position often close to the one I am outlining here. His own answer to his title question is 'yes, it could

of 'threat', currently determining the shape of work under the Media Studies heading. This is the pull of vocationalism.¹⁰ It would be hard to deny the mutual benefits of establishing a connection between study of the media and the acquisition of practitioner/professional skills. Many institutions have put considerable effort into making these connections work at the level of student experience. But too often, despite the claims about integration and complementarity in course documents, there has emerged the strongly dualistic language of 'theory' and 'practice', a language in which the whole project of academic inquiry is radically misdescribed as 'theory' and thereby pre-packaged for *potential* marginalization as a form of 'complementary study'. For if invited to allocate priorities between 'theory' and 'practice' in an educational world of increasing competition and scarce resources, what manager would not find the eminent soundness of the latter more attractive than the ethereal, not to say self-indulgent, ring of the former? To put it this way is to caricature the present situation, but many Media Studies departments could testify to the way in which what looked to be a splendid partnership between academia and the 'real world' can, when aided by certain committee decisions and nervousness over revenue, quite quickly turn into a relationship of domination, affecting resources, appointments, course development and careers. The emerging recipes for the expedient combination of academic and vocational goals will clearly exert a considerable influence on the mid 1990s identity of the area.

Such a view of Media Studies, facing a new and risky future situated rather uncertainly on the fringes of the social sciences (unlike Film Studies, it cannot situate itself primarily as an 'arts' project without a potentially fatal degree of contraction) might provoke several objections. Among these, it might be argued that the shaping influence of feminism and postmodernism upon the post-Marxist character of the field needs more attention.

Feminism has contributed important new ideas to the study of media processes, particularly to an understanding of the relationships between textuality and subjectivity. It has also produced an impressive range of new knowledge about the media and has considerably raised awareness of gender inequalities at all levels of the mediation process.¹¹ It is arguable, however, whether it has introduced wholly new *ways* of conducting research. Its conceptual and methodological innovations (and its valuable critique of existing practice) do not, on their own, seem to provide the basis for an adequate, 'internal' reconstruction of the field.

Postmodernism has become a quite central factor within the terms of much recent media analysis, but its weirdly dual status as both a *condition* to be debated (present or not? good or bad?) and as a *perspective* for reflecting on and analysing conditions, has made its influence more a matter of climactic change than intellectual renewal.

11 See, for instance, the excellent appraisals in Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage, 1994).

It is tempting to regard 'it' (the singular entity is presumptuous) as being as much a symptom of current cultural shifts and intellectual blockages as a means of engaging with them.

Do the scale and complexity of these knowledge problems suggest that it would be best for the area to disaggregate itself into separate discipline interests? No. As a collective grouping for teaching and research activity around one of the major defining components of modern life, the category of Media Studies continues to be a valuable one. There is also a great deal of good and interesting work being done under the heading (certainly as much as, if not more than, within any other academic grouping of equivalent size) though it is being done from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds, using different concepts and methods and applying sometimes entirely different criteria about permissible forms of argument, about what constitutes 'evidence' and about the conventions for connecting propositions to data. In these circumstances, we need fewer rhetorical attempts at unification and at separate intellectual identity and a wider recognition of the lack of perspectival and methodological autonomy from the mainstream of international social studies which a post-Marxist Media Studies can claim. This means, among other things, recognizing a wider range of productive contexts for researching those questions of power, representation and subjectivity/identity which were so high on the 'autonomous' agenda although not always satisfactorily investigated within its terms. It means a re-engagement with general social theory and also a re-engagement with social research method at every point where the project seeks to produce something other than a discourse of 'criticism' (which it should also continue to do, exploring questions of form, value and response, whilst being very aware of what it is doing). It is important to note that these are not in any way conservative recommendations, fitting study of the media back, after a period of eclectic adventures, into the traditional and worthy frameworks of the disciplines. For it is clear that these frameworks and their associated methods have been fundamentally challenged at a number of points (by feminist research and by concepts of cultural process among other factors) and that hardly any social studies field has remained free of introspection, debate and change. But the project of social studies inquiry has not, as some would have it, collapsed into futility or terminal self-doubt, nor has it become indistinguishable from the various perspectives and procedures of the arts and humanities. Research on media and ideas about media processes need to be centrally introduced into its remaking and into its critical engagement with contemporary modernity.

In any reassessment of Media Studies, the question of how to think beyond 'ideology' is worth a measure of separate consideration. On its pivotal importance to the field as initially constituted (and therefore on the size of the hole its waning now leaves), I am fully with Christopher Williams in his recent attempt at a critical stock-taking.¹²

12 Christopher Williams 'After the classic, the classical and ideology: the differences of realism' *Screen*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1994), pp. 275–92. Williams sets out by appearing to take issue with an earlier piece of mine but his only substantial complaint seems to be that I do not go as far as he would wish in my questioning of 1970s theory. See John Corner 'Presumption as theory: "realism" in television studies' *Screen*, vol. 33 no. 1 (1992), pp. 97–102.

13 Williams, 'After the classic, the classical and ideology', p. 276

14 Ibid. p. 287

Williams wonders if it is not 'the case that ideology has become a hopelessly unusable term?' and finds that, indeed, 'repeated wielding of the clumsy club' has had a widespread deleterious influence.¹³ Offering a more positive view of the future, he notes that it needs to be 'replaced' and, with quite extraordinary optimism, that 'this replacement need not, I think, be too difficult'.¹⁴ In fact, what Williams subsequently says shows the sense of brisk remedy to be deceptive. First of all, he suggests that the concept of 'ideology' can be broadly equated with the idea of the 'social', but this would seem to be true of only the most loose and totemic of usages and hardly offers adequate 'replacement'. More indicatively, he goes on to suggest a wide variety of different conceptual alternatives, each relevant to different areas of inquiry, thus abandoning his idea of 'replacement' altogether since it was precisely the job of 'ideology' to unify ideas about meaning and power across the full range of expressive forms. Is there not more which needs rescuing from the debates about 'ideology' than Williams suggests? What the term points to is the way in which the legitimation of economic and political interests interconnects with the making of public meanings, often by way of the naturalization of the contingent. The focus on the links between representation and power, between the aesthetics and logics of signification and the forcefields of value and disposition within which subjectivities are developed, seems well worth maintaining, albeit in rethought terms. No shift to 'opinion' or 'attitude' or, following Williams' concern with textual form, to 'diction', 'expression' or 'convention' will keep a tight enough hold on the factors which need to be addressed *in their interarticulation*. Open argument about these issues, particularly as they appear (or not!) in a range of current research contexts is now, I agree with Williams, one of the most pressing requirements.

Media Studies is still a new arrival within the institutionalized orders of academic inquiry. Its house-style of boldness and disrespect, its eclecticism and its conceptualizing zeal have brought dividends in the context of the older, often evaluatively conservative, disciplines. But as many of these disciplines rethink themselves in the 1990s, the same qualities could quite easily work against its possibilities for steady self-assessment and for theoretical and methodological reconstruction as, precisely, a *multi-disciplinary* field of social research. Since the variety, intensity and importance of the media industries and their activities continue to increase, this would be both an academic and a political loss.

report:

The 'Effects' Tradition – its problems, politics and supersession, London, 26–27 November 1994

From the start, this was going to be an unusual conference. There was no pre-conference publicity, participation was by invitation only and we were spending all weekend together at the Holiday Inn near Heathrow. Not necessarily a recipe for success, but ultimately the event was a unique insight into the current state of play within the groves of British 'Media Studies' Academe. Ostensibly the event had been arranged with a view to 'challenging the "effects" tradition', as the original blurb put it. Although this remained the somewhat nebulous focus for the two days, as a participant the event became rather more interesting because of its informality, the exchange of ideas and ideology and the tentative promise that this was something to build on for the future of the discipline.

Martin Barker and Julian Petley organized the conference out of their concern that 'media effects' in Britain had become translated into a crude caricature focused around recent 'public' outcry about the influence of violence in the media on children and young people. They expressed particular concern that the murder cases of Suzanne Capper and Jamie Bulger had produced a form of 'moral panic', particularly focused on violent videos, underlined by the publicity surrounding the Newson Report and the attempted Alton amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill. The event brought together some of the leading protagonists and academics of the Media Studies field, such as Murdock, Cumberbatch, Seaton, Morley, Merck and Millwood-Hargrave, to name only a few, in order to consider the past, present and future of the issue of media effects. Although 'key' individuals had been invited to present papers, the conference was planned as an exploration

rather than an expression of fixed positions, and to this end it was largely successful.

The conference agenda was organized around four broad areas: firstly the issue of the tradition and history of media effects research, as based within American sociopsychological models; secondly, the question of the audience and the assumed 'problematic' groups of children and women; thirdly, the political economy of media production, concentrating on the questions of censorship, the impact of new technology (satellite, InterNet and so on) and the 'new underground' (Horror/Cyberpunk) of video, magazine and computer software, and fourthly, the issue of ideology, most pertinently the dominance of 'new right' moralism as opposed to the existence of some kind of media studies hegemony.

Martin Barker's opening session attempted to focus our minds on the aftermath of the Newson Report and how he felt this connected to the North American tradition in media effects work. The report produced by an ad hoc group of British psychologists focused on the alleged impact of violent videos on children and was subsequently a lynchpin in David Alton's attempted amendment to prohibit the availability of 'video nasties'. Barker concluded that the problem of countering Newson and the pro-censorship lobby was a problem of being relegated to the status of 'lone voices', and that a central concern must be 'to establish the right to have other kinds of voices heard'. As Julian Petley later informed us, the Newson report was actively commissioned by Alton, a point never highlighted in the media debate at the time. He argued that 'alternative' opinions on this subject had to steer clear of the commonsense assumptions often presented in such debates.

Brian Winston ('The political economy of the media') and the American academic Willard Rowland ('Understanding the American tradition') presented two of the most informative papers of the conference. Winston's lively and somewhat scurrilous discussion of the way in which technological

change is impacting on the media industries, primarily described the 'technological determinist's hyberbolic discourse' as he saw it. He compellingly argued that this discourse not only ignores the sociocultural identity and political economy of media, and therefore cannot fathom the social settings of media use, but is an expression of the gulf between arts and sciences. Winston summed up by suggesting the information super highway should at the moment be regarded as little more than a tollroad. Rowland followed this with an equally cogent attack on the American effects tradition. His analysis of what he termed the 'ritual evasion' about television violence was important in understanding the central tenets of the US policy remit now taking on an international character with regard to censorship legislation. He suggested that uninformed journalism falls prey to simplistic assumptions on this issue and that a 'recidivist symbolic exercise' still pertains in the US as it relates to violence.

Guy Cumberbatch ('What is wrong with the effects tradition?') gave a disappointing paper which, for me, did little more than reassert a different version of 'commonsense' – that the media does not cause direct imitation of behaviour or actions. Ian Vine ('Illusory causes and harmful effects') took the same issues to a much greater depth when he overviewed the sociopsychological research base of 'arousal' experimentation. He quite correctly challenged the notion that such experimentation tells us about individual's consciously expressed *reasons* for being physiologically aroused by violent stimuli (such as videos)

Pat Holland 'Constructions of Childhood' focused on the concern not only of children as consumers but as a 'representation of the anxieties of society', as she put it. Although modest, Holland's paper was a pertinent reminder that today's concerns about the 'disappearance' of childhood as innocent are intimately connected to the 'privatization' of children's 'pleasurable environment' in the

nineteenth-century shift from cinema to home. The representation of unruly children as 'little demons', very common throughout the media, is an expression, argued Holland, of adult anxieties concerning the regulation/protection of children.

The promise of Avedon Carol's paper, 'Women as consumers of violent media', was unfortunately not fulfilled. Carol raised important questions concerning the idea that both violent media and sexual media are perceived as 'boys' stuff', as she put it. However, the points she touched on were not developed further, either by herself or other conference participants. The contradictions regarding women's consumption or attempted regulation of violent/sexual media raise crucial issues about gender in relation to the production and consumption of media products. The necessary specification of such a broad generalization was sadly absent from this forum however. Particularly, I would stress from my own research, the importance of distinguishing *between* violent and sexual imagery, and also the variations *within* these categories in relation to gender.

The participation of James Ferman from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) was a surprise but welcome addition to the proceedings. Towards the end of the second day Ferman agreed to outline some of his own thoughts regarding the BBFC's role in the effects debate, and much of his albeit brief presentation reflected on the conference discussions that preceded him. However, he seemed to hold a very firm olive branch in his hand towards the assembled 'experts' who have previously felt no qualms about their outright condemnation of the Board's practices. I strongly hope that his attitude expressed on the day will carry through into a further democratization of the BBFC's conduct, a process which has already shown glimmers of light in 1994. I later speculated on the possible impact of the weekend's proceedings on Ferman when, only a matter of weeks after the conference, the BBFC

announced, after some considerable delay, that it would give a General Cinema Release to Stone's *Natural Born Killers*.

Graham Murdock ('Dealing with the "common sense"') for me presented by far the most interesting paper. He strongly argued for the recognition of the sociohistorical discourses which surround the paternalist concern about the possibility that the media can 'deprave and corrupt' ordinary people. His assertion that positivistic social science sanctifies the 'common sense' should be of central concern to all media researchers. Murdock's thorough presentation of, in particular, the class basis of the behaviourists' psychological media research, is part of a wider thesis on which he is working and I for one anticipate its completion eagerly

So, where did all the hypothesising and debate get us after a weekend? There were significant problems which emerged in trying to 'harmonize', if you like, some of the disparate strands outlined. This, in part, reflected the fact that the overall remit for the weekend was too wide, a point made by many participants. Although there was merit in trying to keep the original agenda open-ended, in practice it clearly led to frustrations about the realistic achievements possible in such a situation. Much of this criticism focused on the marginalization of feminist critiques within media studies and the fact that the substantive sessions by Holland and Carol 'ran out of time' because of their placement late on Sunday. This might be extended to an exclusion of debates concerning ethnicity and race as well as the minimization of class perspectives.

The weekend was a start, however, in the long neglected examination of the state of play in British Media Studies with regard to media

effects. It raised, perhaps inevitably, far more questions than it answered, but hopefully with a view to creating a tentative step along the road towards the concrete examination of some of the most pressing concerns about audiences, censorship and democratization of media production in Britain.

Although levels of agreement were clearly expressed there was still a depressing retrenchment into individualized academic positions at certain junctures. It is this hurdle, framed within the tendency towards 'egotistical' academic research as I see it, which will have to be overcome if there is any hope of creating a form of 'media studies hegemony'. A related concern to me was the inability to see *across* disciplines and make the relevant ideological connections which are necessary in any debates around, for instance, 'moral panics'. I think some of these problems were also to do with the very London-centred collection of participants, many of whom clearly knew each other from other forums.

On a positive note, the weekend provided an explicit realization of the fact that the political-economic examination of media cannot ignore the specifics of production which are important to any understanding of audiences. Conversely, the cultural studies approaches through aesthetics and discourse analysis can often minimize the importance of structural and material contexts. 'What people do with texts' was, for a long time, ignored or minimized in the British tradition of media studies. Few researchers within media sociology have adequately tackled the methodological problems of assessing audience understandings. In many senses this conference was an explicit articulation of that failure, and, as one of my colleagues commented, 'at last the penny has dropped'.

Paula Skidmore

review:

Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 302 pp.

LISA CARTWRIGHT

The Making of Exile Cultures is, as the cover copy explains, a case study – an ethnography – of Iranian television production in southern California. Its focus is the narrowcast cable television produced for the estimated two hundred to eight hundred thousand Iranians (many of them people in exile) who live in the Los Angeles area, a community that formed after the 1978–9 revolution in Iran. Iranian television is aired primarily on Channel 18 (KCSI-TV), an independent station that calls itself the ‘international station’ and provides twenty-four hour programming in sixteen languages. The station televises what is probably the most ethnically and linguistically diverse menu of any station in the USA. Naficy explains that the US Iranian community ‘leap-frogged’, economically speaking, over many of the other immigrant groups comprising KCSI’s narrowcast audiences, establishing businesses and attaining positions within many professions relatively quickly, with the result that Iranians had enough capital to initiate and retain control over their own media production and programming – a factor that distinguishes US Iranian television from many of the national networks targeting specific ‘ethnic’ audiences. For example, Univision, Telemundo and Galavision – Spanish-language networks that narrowcast primarily to Latina/o audiences – are run not by individual Latina/o entrepreneurs but by US or foreign multinational corporations. These networks import most of their programmes from Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil. Conversely, all but one of the Iranian programmes aired in the Los Angeles area at

the time of Naficy's writing were produced outside Iran by entrepreneurs who opposed the Islamic government there.

Naficy points out that despite the absence of a single shared religion (for the most part, religious affiliation is split among the Bahai, Muslim and Jewish faiths), and despite the fact that there is no single residential concentration of Iranians in southern California (no 'Irantown'), there is a cohesive imaginary community, a US Iranian 'nation in exile'. This construction, which centres on the condition and experience of exile more than on a geographical site or cultural practice, transcends the internal religious, cultural and geographical differences that segment southern California's Iranian community, supporting the production of a relatively unitary popular and televisual culture that is disseminated almost entirely in the shared Persian language.

The Making of Exile Cultures is meticulously researched, providing detailed statistical, historical, and cultural information about US Iranian television in relation not only to other areas of so-called minority television but to other Iranian media forms (magazines, the cinema) and to Iranian and Iranian-exilic politics and culture generally. It is no small achievement of the book that it pulls the focus in Middle East studies from geographically cohesive national cultures, 'hard' politics and high culture (art, literature) to exilic cultures, media politics and the popular. The endorsements by George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer that grace the book-jacket testify to the fact that the book is also an important contribution to cultural anthropology. Although it is a close case study, *The Making of Exile Cultures* participates in debates and methodologies across a range of disciplines beyond media studies. It is what Lila Abu-Lughod has called a text with multiple audiences – including those Iranian producers and viewers who are the subjects of the study, as well as academics in Iran. Naficy's status as an Iranian exile (and perhaps also as an ex-television producer) puts him in the position of those whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage, and hence whose critical practice unsettles conventional ethnographic (and academic) relations to audience and culture.¹ Thus Naficy writes from both inside and outside the respective spheres of Iranian culture and production culture, as well as from within multiple disciplinary frameworks, with the result that his book complicates in useful ways certain aspects of television studies, including the idea of a singular mainstream national audience, the binary producer–consumer model, and the exclusion of work on 'minority' television from most disciplinary debates.

What I want to emphasise here is the book's value to media studies beyond its use as either a model 'interdisciplinary' work or a narrow case study. Specifically, the book implicitly raises important questions about the uses of ethnographic method and the place of 'minority' television and television 'subgenres' in the field. As a text within film

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod 'Writing against culture' in Richard G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), p. 137.

and television studies, *The Making of Exile Cultures* is not simply a much-needed contribution to the growing set of micro-histories of local media use. Rather, it demonstrates the increasing centrality of minority television cultures to the overall structure of North American mainstream television. It should go without saying that US television is an increasingly heterogeneous industry and culture, what with the expansion of cable programming, the industry's recognition of so-called minority audiences as a lucrative set of markets and the development of narrowcasting strategies, and so on. Hence local studies like Naficy's are crucial resources and models for anyone trying to understand the present and future of television's globalization.

It is useful here to recall some arguments made by David Morley a few years back, in a 1991 issue of *Screen*. Morley considered the place of ethnographic studies of media consumption in the analysis of globalization, localization, and domestication in contemporary culture. He began by warning against the tendency towards detail and specificity in this kind of work – what he calls the ‘so what?’ problem (as in ‘so what if Iranian exilic television is different from Black Entertainment Television?’ I prefer to call this the ‘who cares?’ problem, as in ‘who cares what kind of television Iranians in LA watch?’ – an attitude that brings to mind the selection politics of television ratings organizations.) The ‘problem’ that Morley identifies is that fine-grained analyses result in endless sets of description of the processes of consumption without adequate reference to broader political or ideological questions.² This formulation is not far from Meaghan Morris's banality thesis – that is, her charge that much audience work in cultural studies repeats the banal proclamation that cultural texts are complex and contradictory, therefore people using them produce complex and contradictory cultures.³ Morley ultimately argued (quite soundly) that ‘the point is not to substitute the one (micro) level for the other (macro) but rather to integrate the analysis of the “broader questions” of ideology, power and politics . . . with the analysis of the consumption, uses and functions of television in everyday life’.⁴ However, ongoing debates in media studies suggest that the jury is still out on which ideological questions merit the designation ‘broad’, and whether broad questions are more properly arrived at through a privileging of the global or the local.

The Making of Exile Cultures is without doubt what Morley would call a fine-grained analysis, or what others might call a subgenre study or a local history. Naficy himself refers to his project (albeit in his book-cover blurb) as a case study, an account of a ‘minority’ television culture, a ‘special case’. But how is Iranian exilic culture a special case – that is, how is this book *not* about broad questions of ideology, power, and politics? I want to argue here that it is precisely in the study of ‘minor’ local television cultures such as the one considered in *The Making of Exile Cultures* that media studies can

2 David Morley, ‘Where the global meets the local: notes from the sitting room’, *Screen* vol. 32, no. 1 (1991), p. 1

3 Meaghan Morris, ‘Banality in cultural studies’ *Block*, no. 14 (1988), p. 22

4 Morley ‘Where the global meets the local’ p. 5

arrive at an understanding of the broad issues of ideology, power and politics. To put this another way, if the hyperspecificity of books like *The Making of Exile Cultures* is a 'problem' for media and cultural studies folk, it is a problematic that originates in the circumstances we analyse, wherein ideology, power and politics are played out across highly fragmented and dispersed social formations, and not in media theorists' bothersome predilection for 'minor' industry details and 'minor' television cultures.⁵

The Making of Exile Cultures implicitly challenges some of the globalizing tendencies within audience studies on a number of levels. For example, work that takes as its premise a mass or popular television audience, however nuanced and detailed, often fails to consider some of the limitations of the binary producer–consumer, popular–subcultural model. While it might be said that Naficy's book is primarily about production and programming and not about audiences *per se*, his analysis makes it clear that production is the focus precisely because the producers of Iranian television are most often themselves members of the consumer community under study. The producers whom Naficy describes were motivated to produce by a desire for texts that they themselves could use – in other words, they make shows for themselves and their family and friends, or to promote their own businesses and political viewpoints (which, as Babak Elahi has noted, may range from monarchist to Mojahedin, or anti-Khomeini Muslims).⁶ Moreover, in much Iranian television production the boundaries between the private space of the audience (the home) and the public space of the production company are blurred. In an account of the structure of exilic television production, we hear about producers who operate out of their own homes, taping shows in their living rooms and doing business in home offices or at the poolside while lounging with friends, family and refreshments. More direct evidence of the ambiguity between production and consumption in this context is the fact that the viewing audience is composed of a high percentage of business owners and professionals whose advertising dollars subsidize programming, giving the audience a more direct say in programming decisions. These factors, as well as the tendency in Iranian programmes to address the viewing audience as an extended family,⁷ suggest that the Iranian television audience in the Los Angeles area plays a role in production and programming decisions that is perhaps more directly influential than most television audiences.

As Morley noted, the point that 'cultures are more complex than we thought' is banal only if the complex culture is not discussed in relation to a broader ideological picture. Along these lines, Naficy situates Iranian exilic television in relation to the broad category of 'minority' television. The distinction he establishes among three general overlapping categories – ethnic, transnational, and exilic television – are extremely useful in understanding the dynamic of narrowcasting in cable programming.

5 Again this is not to privilege micro- over macro-processes. I would argue with Abu-Lughod that the effects of extralocal and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words' Abu-Lughod 'Writing against culture', p. 150

6 Babak Elahi, 'Hybrid haggling (review of *The Making of Exile Cultures*)', *Afterimage*, vol. 21 no. 8 (1994), p. 15

7 This point of Naficy's is discussed at length by Elahi in 'Hybrid haggling' p. 15

Ethnic television refers to programmes produced by long-established indigenous communities, and is intracultural in the sense that these shows centre on the interests of a specific US community. Conversely, transnational television, composed largely of imported programmes, often consists of shows that are shot (and situated diegetically) outside the US, '[pushing] to the background the drama of acculturation and resistance' that characterizes much ethnic programming. Interestingly, Naficy includes in the transnational television category the Spanish-language networks Telemundo, Univision and Galavisión, reasoning that although these networks narrowcast their programmes largely to US Latina/o communities, they are 'only partly ethnic' insofar as they are produced by multinationals and much of their programming is imported and thus does not address the local issues and concerns of US Latina/os.

Exilic television, produced by exiles living in a host country, tends to 'encode and foreground collective and individual struggles for authenticity and identity, deterritorialization and reterritorialization' (p. 62). One could argue that Naficy's description of ethnic television could encompass these characteristics as well, but the point he makes throughout the book is that, for people in exile, the relation to such things as community and territory is less secure than that of more established immigrant groups, whose members are more likely to have a relatively stable relationship to the US as a geographical home and a site of cultural practice.

Naficy sets up another set of distinctions – among the terms ethnic, diasporic, and exilic – to support his argument about the specificity of exilic television. Unlike members of an ethnic community, people in exile cannot claim membership of a homogeneous ethnic culture. Rather, they experience a state of liminality that is the result of the strength of their attachment to another (irretrievable) place and time. Liminality puts a check on the process of acculturation and assimilation necessary to the creation of an ethnic culture. And unlike people in diaspora, whose primary relationship to community is through various compatriot groups dispersed outside the homeland, people in exile experience a primary attachment to the homeland itself as an imaginary geographical site. Thus the imagined homeland, more than the imagined community, is the locus of an intensive nostalgia, with the result that television texts often become the grounds for idealized fantasies of the past and the homeland.

The locus of exilic culture, then, is absence, loss and the painful experience of dislocation – conditions that set the televisual experience of the exilic subject apart from the constructions based on shared notions of presence, location, and 'positive' strategies of acculturation and resistance around which members of ethnic groups may build media cultures. This formulation raises some interesting questions for anyone concerned with television and its uses in community formation, and with media strategies of collective political

resistance within and across cultural categories. The argument is that while Iranians in the US have had the financial resources needed to take charge of the means of production, they have not had the perhaps more proactive relationship to community and identity formation that grounds ethnic or indigenous minority television audiences (for example Latina/o viewers of Telemundo, black viewers of Black Entertainment Television). While one could certainly argue that ethnic groups are also motivated to produce and use television to negotiate loss, dislocation, and an unrealizable desire for reconnection with a site of origin, it is important to note the distinctions (including and beyond distinctions of genre and textual strategies) that Naficy marks out between exilic and ethnic experiences. Using Salman Rushdie's exile novel *The Satanic Verses* as his example, Naficy identifies hybridity among exiles as a strategy of disavowal, 'an idiosyncratic form of adaptation whose influence may fail to reach across time' and whose effects may include lack of legal protection in the event of the kind of mass critical misreading to which Rushdie's work was subjected. (p. 189) 'Individual hybridity' – a hybridity 'without agency' – is the potential experience of the cultural producer in exile. Syncretism, which Naficy identifies as a more collective process motivated by the trauma of exilic experience, allows for the creation of a more unitary third culture, and a more proactive mode of political agency. While Naficy does acknowledge that these categories overlap, it would be interesting to extend his argument regarding the specificity of exilic hybridity to include consideration of the specific textual and experiential effects of hybridity and syncretism among people in the ethnic groups that partake of other parts of the 'multicultural menu' that KCSI and other cable networks offer.⁸

Naficy analyses the particular conditions of exilic television through a methodology that combines historical, political, and psychoanalytic modes of analysis. This is important to note, not because the book models the virtues of interdisciplinarity, but because it demonstrates how the particular conditions that Naficy studies (and the conditions under which he writes) make it necessary to use a range of critical discourses together, including the mode of personal narrative (which is in many ways one of the most compelling strategies used in the book). For example, scenes that romanticize pre-Islamic times in Iran (a frequent theme in music videos and narratives) are explained in terms of the specific historical referents of political–architectural–iconographic images. This more historical–descriptive kind of reading is combined with a use of psychoanalysis, which provides a terminology for analysing the particular function of Iranian popular memory and transnational subjectivity in the production and use of television texts. This combination of methodologies is more in evidence in postcolonial literary studies. Psychoanalytic terminology, usually at home in the analysis of the individual spectator or the text, is here the basis for theorizing the text's place in the collective

⁸ Arjun Appadurai's concept of a 'global ethnoscape – landscapes of group identity that are neither tightly territorialized nor culturally homogeneous – is useful in thinking through some of the issues that come up around Naficy's overlapping categories. See his 'Global ethnoscapes: notes for a transnational anthropology', in Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology*, pp. 191–210.

construction of an imagined nation or community. But the imagined community that Naficy describes is far from utopian with regard to its renegotiation of categories of nation, race, and gender:

In the case of Iranian exile, it has been the royalist factions who have been most successful in regulating the flux of fetishization and in controlling Iranian politics and political discourses in California. They have accomplished this by promoting an anthropomorphized notion of homeland as an indigent and suffering mother. The overdetermination of this notion in exilic media fetishizes 'motherland', and chauvinistic nationalism results. . . . When the fetish involves a nation and its history, such views can lead to jingoistic nationalism and to racially prejudiced stances, both of which are evident and implied in the discourse of Iranian racial difference. In this way the media, especially television, produce in exile a cultural artifact, an imaginary nation . . . (p. 132)

This account of an Andersonian imagined community, consolidated through compounded racism/chauvinism/jingoism, is certainly disheartening for readers who look to local television as a venue for the formation of new ethnoscapas and new modes of intra- and intercultural debate.⁹ But *The Making of Exile Cultures* does offer evidence that some US Iranians are using television in more promising ways than those discussed in the previous passage. Not surprisingly, Naficy observes that programming by and for Iranian youth presents evidence of a more syncretic media culture in the making

Naficy compares the backward-looking aesthetic of nostalgia evident in Iranian royalist-influenced programmes with the strategies of parody and cultural critique deployed in many of the music videos and magazine shows aimed at younger Iranians. A scene from the music video *Pul* (or *Money*) by the all-male rock band, Black Cats, uses a genre that Naficy traces back to the sixteenth century in which Iranians criticize a European (and, more recently, US and US Iranian) fascination with wealth: an Arab sheik lines up coins on the back of a blonde, bikini-clad woman. Clearly, this scene is not without problems vis-a-vis race and gender. Naficy's point, however, is that the mix of 'western' artefacts and 'native' iconography that is found in this and many other music videos and programmes is presented (and viewed) in a highly complex and unresolved way with relation to constructions of self and other, and with relation to processes of assimilation and resistance (whether to aspects of western culture, to Islam, or to idealized representation of a 'native' culture). Rather than attempting to make totalizing claims about the (ultimately positive or negative) political implications of these media texts and their uses, Naficy points to some of their more unexpected but interesting implications.

Among the most compelling of these readings are the discussions of gender transgression in music videos. They are compelling because they begin to indicate how exilic culture is articulated through

9 Naficy's use of the concept of an imagined nation draws on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

performative discourses on gender, sexuality and race, and not only through debates about national and class relations. One of the set of texts considered is the 'tough guy' drag performances of popular female musicians – exilic music videos in which women singers evoke the genre of the street-savvy tough-guy (whom Naficy describes as part Robin Hood, part villainous middle-man), a figure who was played by men in pre-revolutionary Iranian popular culture as well as in more recent exilic cinema, and is now parodied in these televised drag performances. Naficy also notes the national/racial transgression that occurs when male Iranian singers feature dark-haired Anglo women dancers or, conversely, when Iranian women performers adopt the styles of Anglo-US performers. These videos, Naficy suggests,

point out the potential for amphibolic (ambiguous, double-sided) figures to permit transgression of previously fixed boundaries of gender – in this case women mimicking men. Such gender-crossing mimicry is part of a larger destabilization. Iranian women in exile have been able to free themselves more than the men from the clutches of traditional patriarchy, and their mimicking of the men is an indication of this instability and newfound freedom. (p. 186)

The assertion that Iranian women are experiencing a 'newfound freedom' from patriarchy in the USA would benefit from references to literature by Iranian feminist scholars addressing this complex issue. This problem is aggravated by the fact that in every example of gender transgression described, it is women who do the transgressing. More useful, however, is the general idea that the cultural syncretism which originates with the circumstances of geographical and national liminality opens up a space for the public transgression of normative gender roles and normative ideas about race and physical appearance. Naficy's analysis of these scenes suggests that gender-crossing is a part of a broader exilic discourse on the formation of transcultural identities and communities. His analysis deserves to be considered alongside other recent accounts of transgendered/transnational performance (for example, Kathleen Newman's account of national liminality and gender, class and sexual masquerade in the film *La Ofrenda: The Day of the Dead* [Lourdes Portillo and Susana Muñoz, 1989])¹⁰ My point is not that different instances of transgender/transnational performance have the same uses. Rather, these studies instruct us in different ways to theorize the particular ways that gender and race come into play in internal cultural debates that are less 'about' gender and race than about the formation of (trans)national cultures.

To return to Morley and his thinking on localization and globalization in media theory, this formulation about the interconstitutive relation among gender, race and nation indicates some of the ways that an ostensibly 'local' form – Iranian music video – has important implications for 'broader' ideological questions (of race,

¹⁰ Kathleen Newman 'Steadfast love and subversive acts: the politics of *La Ofrenda: the Days of the Dead*', *Spectator*, vol. 13 no. 1 (1992)

gender, sexuality, nationality and so on). If a fine-grained analysis of an exilic music video text can lead us to understand something about the relationship between (trans)gendered performance and (trans)national culture, then perhaps we need to reconsider where we rank case studies and work on the local in the scheme of things. *The Making of Exile Cultures* should be read and used by media theorists, then, not just because it fills in another gap in our knowledge of narrowcast television's heterogeneous field (as if there were a collective puzzle in the making here), but because it provides media theory with some important new ways of working through the particular questions of race, gender, nation, industry and audience that come into play regardless of our respective 'local' interests.

review:

Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 344pp.

CHRISTINE GERAGHTY

Cagney and Lacey is something of a *cause célèbre* in the annals of television for women – a programme which was apparently conceived with an overt commitment to feminist causes, created its audience by working with women's organizations like the National Organization for Women and was saved from early extinction by the efforts of its articulate and forceful female fans. It is one of the pleasures of Julie D'Acci's book that she gives a carefully nuanced account of the complexities of these processes but does not strip them of their resonance. She 'prints the legend' but does so in a way that makes it more useful and pertinent to those who will read this book and, just as importantly, teach with it

Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey is welcome on a number of counts. Firstly, it, along with previous work,¹ makes a case study of the programme which opens up its possibilities for study. Secondly, it offers a particular account of feminist positions inside and outside television theory which reflect intelligently on current concerns. In addition, in the emphasis it places on the audience and its use of viewers' letters, it provides further examples of how work on audience might be undertaken and so extends the debate in that area.

The book's main aim, as the subtitle indicates, is to provide a detailed case study of *Cagney and Lacey*, and D'Acci successfully follows her own injunction that textual, audience and industry analyses need to be deployed together to 'reveal the dense complexity of the whole enterprise' of television and 'to allow us to see more clearly the

1 See for instance Beverley Alcock and Jocelyn Robson, 'Cagney and Lacey revisited' *Feminist Review* no. 35 (1990), pp. 42–53, len Ang, 'Melodramatic identifications: television fiction and women's fantasy' in Mary Ellen Brown (ed.) *Television and Women's Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1990) pp. 75–88 Danae Clark, 'Cagney and Lacey: feminist strategies of detection' in Brown (ed.) *Television and Women's Culture* pp. 117–33 and Mimi White 'Ideological analysis and television' in Robert E. Allen (ed.) *Channels of Discourse Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) pp. 181–7

innumerable aspects that fashion the phenomenon'. (p. 208) The three elements are not dealt with separately but interwoven into an account of the history of the programme's production, the changes in genre, narrative organization and characterization which took place over the years, and the programme's ongoing relationship with its female audience. In her discussion of the initial made-for-television film and the first television series, D'Acci can point to the way in which the overt feminism of the first series was a product of factors in production, text and audience, and suggests the complex way in which the audience was both identified for the programme through marketing strategies, and asserted itself through a process of recognition and identification with the textual pleasures on offer. This triple stranding then allows D'Acci to analyse the shifts of emphasis whereby the overt feminism of the original series was overtaken in the text by an emphasis on women's issues rooted in individual characterization rather than the social and political contexts more evident in the first episodes. She suggests that this led to a more ambiguous and tacit feminism which meant that, while feminist readings were not necessarily lost, they were situated in a less political appeal within a female discourse.

D'Acci argues that *Cagney and Lacey* emerged at a particular point in television history when changes in US television structures coincided with the high water mark of liberal feminism. She describes the interaction between the makers of the programme and such feminist institutions as *MS* magazine and *NOW* and gives examples of storylines and dialogue which were based on that interaction. She ascribes the changes in the programme (most famously the change in the actress playing Cagney, but also changes in genres and narrative organization) to the backlash against feminism sweeping the USA from the early 1980s. Whilst this positioning of the programme in a broader social and political context is welcome, the existence and effect of the backlash is perhaps more assumed than argued and, as a non-US reader, I felt that clearer connections were needed to better establish this relationship.

This case-study highlighted for me some of the difficulties of thinking and teaching about television drama based on the inaccessibility of a wide range of programmes and the tendency of television itself to mock or ignore its own past. D'Acci is 'lucky' in one sense in that the text, *Cagney and Lacey*, is still accessible, available on reruns and in the video collections of committed fans. She is therefore opening up the programmes for re-viewing rather than describing programmes in an archive. She also avoids the camp nostalgia which sometimes afflicts work on television; her critical respect for the programme opens up its problems and ambiguities in a productive and accessible way. *Defining Women* would provide excellent material for teaching both television drama and feminist criticism

In some senses though, and perhaps in the interests of focusing the case-study, the book hesitates from pushing further into current debates. D'Acci gives useful accounts of the debates on spectatorship and female audiences (though, irritatingly, some of this takes place in the lengthy footnotes). However, her analysis of the role of liberal feminism in the development of *Cagney and Lacey* makes for an interesting contrast with more recent feminist work. Her account of liberal feminism is critical of its limited base in white, middle-class, aspirational preoccupations, nevertheless it suggests that liberal feminism, with its emphasis on the public arena, its concern for issues of pay and work as well as representation, and its demand for equality, was crucial in the creation of a space where *Cagney and Lacey* and its audience could survive. By contrast, much recent feminist work has emphasized a separate 'women's culture' based on notions of private space, pleasurable consumption and an understanding of the formation of individual subjectivity. D'Acci acknowledges this change at times but does not directly comment on it. It is perhaps because she speaks to my own concerns about this that I would emphasize her rather critical account of the programme's shift from the police genre of the first series to the 'woman's programme' (p. 125); her suggestion that soap opera and melodrama are not the entire measure of women's pleasures; and her analysis of the way in which the programme's later dependence on 'women's issues' (rather than women's rights) fitted so readily with the exploitation format, emphasizing women as victims and sexual objects, an emphasis which was used to promote certain episodes. D'Acci acknowledges the arguments that women's constrained social positions have 'also produced spaces for "women's culture"' though the rather bathetic examples – 'shopping, escape into media fiction, or discussion and bonding around particular TV programs' (p. 104) – may give the game away. And it is significant that at the end she calls for women's involvement in the public space 'We must also think anew about coalitions that will help us deal with TV's power and pleasures and with its potential for influencing politics and social change'. (p. 209) Who that 'we' is and how it might be constructed remains a key question.

Defining Audiences also offers food for thought in current debates about audience research and 'ethnography'. Unlike interviews or observations made in a domestic context, the viewers' letters from which D'Acci quotes were part of 'public debate – the moment at which alternative and oppositional interpretation becomes actual collective political action' (p. 99) and they seem to have a confidence born from that collectivity. D'Acci acknowledges that the letters largely came from a white, middle-class audience mobilized by the tenets of liberal feminism. Even so, their ability to comment forcefully and effectively is striking and draws on knowledge not just of the programme but of ratings systems, professional practices and of their

own construction (and resistance to construction) as 'audience'. D'Acci does not so much read this audience as set its readings alongside those of other groups. Thus, the passionate desire, evidenced in the letters, to see 'real women' on television, and the quite conscious use of Cagney and Lacey as role models to effect change are set against feminist media scholarship's doubts about realism's tendency to reproduce and perpetuate patriarchal models of signification and identification. The letter writers are not, therefore, being translated into the public world of media research by the commentator but are from the start analysing and presenting their own readings in a public forum in a way which interestingly affects the methodological balance of power.

One final point relates to the book's own production practices. Buyers of the book will find 209 pages of text and a subsequent 133 pages of footnotes, episode script and index, but no bibliography. The footnotes are lengthy and the arguments in them, some of which are important, could have been followed more easily in the text. The episode script has no illustrations, no explanation of the shooting schedule, and it is not clear how it might be used by the reader or for teaching. But despite this, *Defining Women* remains a welcome example of the way in which a specific and nuanced account can both illuminate a particular set of production-text-audience relations and reflect on more general issues in media and feminist analysis.

review:

Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir: a Reader*. London and New York: Verso, 1993, 300pp.

Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 268pp.

BARRY TAYLOR

Film noir, as anyone who does their best to teach the 'genre' well knows, is the black hole of film criticism, the place where the usually serviceable procedures of generic definition, historicization and theoretical analysis collapse in on themselves in a way that suggests that the rules of the critical game, our very sense of the 'usually serviceable', need reconsideration. In their different ways, each of these books contributes to the problem of noir, both in the sense of usefully carrying debate forward, and by exemplifying the continuing impossibility of any singular or comprehensive critical capture of the noir 'object'.

As both books make clear, the form of noir criticism is by now inevitably reflexive: an anxious and interminable return to a 'history' of analysis which cannot close the critical case. The result is a replaying by the critics of the options open to the male protagonists in noir's Oedipal scenarios either to assume the position of the Father by venturing another authoritative articulation of critical Law, or a transgressive bid for freedom from the rules of the game, a (doomed) refusal of criticism's own Symbolic order. Broadly speaking, Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street* tends, despite his own metacritical care and acuity, towards the first option of legalistic closure; conversely, in her role as editor of *Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec laughs in the face of the Law and sets her contributors loose on their own divergent escape routes.

Whether *Shades of Noir* is a canny exercise in postmodern dispersal or a ragbag of incompatible positions is one undecidable question thrown up by the interminability of noir criticism, and one which makes itself felt throughout Copjec's resolutely non-totalizing editorial introduction. What the collection as a sequence reveals, however, is the co-presence of both a mistrust of totalizing gestures and the lure of critical closure, sometimes in the same essay. The resistance to totality takes a number of forms. In Marc Vernet's opening 'Film noir on the edge of doom', the overhasty generic/stylistic categorizations and historical generalizations of earlier 'theories' of noir are subjected to a salutary dose of closely detailed institutional and social historiography. This has the effect of resituating the films within a longer and more complex contextual narrative, and a wider, more carefully nuanced cross-generic framework. The danger, of course, is that this kind of scholarly notation produces a field of finely specified empirical detail which carries coded within it a resistance to *any* attempt at historical generalization or theoretical positioning – a return to that standoff between film 'historians' and 'theorists' which Krutnik rightly laments in his introduction. One sign of the actually inextricable nature of these two critical tendencies is Vernet's own inability to resist pulling together his own list of constitutive noir features – seriousness of tone, explicitly symbolic motifs, shrinkage of the frame, modernity of acting style – to form an implicit competing definition of the 'genre'.

The essays by Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek, and David Reid and Jayne L. Walker also usefully question and complicate some of the received positions of noir criticism – its links to hard-boiled fiction, inter-generic positioning, and in particular its relation to the ritually, and far too thinly evoked 'context' of postwar disturbance in family and gender relations in the USA. Reid's and Walker's essay on Cornell Woolrich excitingly opens noir to a densely documented field of wider US cultural themes as articulated in popular literature and social and political commentary, with particularly enlightening sections on noir's relation to the nineteenth-century fictional genre of 'mysteries of the city' and the discourse of anti-urbanism with which it intersects. The fact that the essay drifts – enjoyably – into digression and anecdote is only one more symptom of the fact that the collection reveals more generally, that in resisting closure upon the 'metaphorical' axis of definition by similarity and class, noir seems to impel its critics towards a metonymic, descriptive 'tracking' of the critical object.

In Copjec's and Žižek's essays a more or less explicit critique of over-hasty anchorings of noir to historical context is tied to often dazzling post-Lacanian meditations on what Žižek terms the '*noir* subject'. Both, from different angles, concern themselves with a splitting of subjectivity in the noir protagonist between the imperatives of the drive and the demands of the Symbolic, and both have valuable correctives to offer to critical approaches which, in working

consciously or unconsciously to suture that split, may be seen as complicit with the film's own recuperative strategies. Despite their suspiciousness of unproblematized critical closure, however, there is a strong monological feel to these essays, a sense in which the triad of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic and its sidekicks, the Drive and Desire, are functioning as one more determining structure to be unearthed in all noir narratives. The fact that Copjec can attack the underdeveloped 'historicization' of the postwar 'crisis of masculinity' accounts, only to replace it with a still vaguer and less demonstrable thesis of the 'ascendancy of drive over desire' in the postwar USA, suggests that any *rapprochement* between history and theory on the lines Krutnik hopes for will, at the very least, require everyone to do better history.

Elsewhere in *Shades of Noir*, Elizabeth Cowie usefully redescribes the generic field of noir in order to reposition women as the subjects of noir narratives, rather than merely their fetishized and demonized objects. Other essays by Janet Bergstrom and Manthia Diawara offer readings of, respectively, *The Blue Gardenia* and the use of noir motifs in recent work by black directors, which proceed as if untroubled by the metacritical questions which Copjec's introduction puts on the book's agenda. Fredric Jameson brings Heidegger to a reading of space in Chandler in order to demonstrate that *everywhere* in Chandler's fiction is in fact an Office, without, however, mentioning why it might be worth considering this to be the case: a textbook instance of how not to 'apply' theory to popular texts, and a *reductio ad absurdum* of the tendency to seek the single key principle which will unlock the noir problem.

On the whole, *Shades of Noir* shows us critics getting on with business despite the metacritical dilemmas which are inherent in its subject and announced in its editor's principled abstention from the editorial function: critics decrying premature totalization and then trying a bit themselves; critics carrying on with the big theory regardless; critics scavenging happily in the trackless rubble of the great theoretical systems. Lyotard's dream of the buzzing of innumerable discrete micro-narratives looms over the collection, but in the depressive, noir-ish version, where none of the monologues connects with any other. The one place where an active listening is going on across the whole range of critical positions and, as a consequence, an agile recombination of dispersed elements into a flexible and resourceful hybrid criticism, is in Fred Pfeil's exhilarating discussion of *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2* as postmodern 'family noir'. Pfeil's combination of theoretical nimbleness, attentiveness to historical specificities and an ability to keep critique in fruitful interaction with the viewer's 'untheorized' pleasure is exemplary, and not just for noir criticism.

After the ellipses and slipperiness of *Shades of Noir*, Frank Krutnik's *In A Lonely Street* offers, along with its theoretical and metacritical self-awareness, some of the traditional consolations of the

scholarly film monograph. Drawing on a compendious knowledge of noir and its circumambient generic field, Krutnik situates his own thesis on noir as a form of 'masculine melodrama' in relation to a thorough introductory survey of the critical debates and their implications for film studies more generally, particularly in relation to problems of genre criticism.

As is well known, noir provokes genre criticism in its refusal to settle into its own exclusive patterning of narrative conventions, thematic fixations and stylistic features, the tendency of its 'distinctive' characteristics to turn up in a multitude of other generic places, and its (arguable) delimitation by a particular historical context. Starting with these difficulties, Krutnik usefully suggests that rather than centring a definition of noir upon particular narrative, thematic or stylistic elements, all of which can be spotted 'outside' noir, the critic should be looking for texts where those defining elements come together in a distinctively noir ensemble. The further implication of this, as Krutnik suggests, is that the critical gaze needs to play across the generic *system* as a whole, rather than attempting to define and mark off discrete generic entities. In this poststructuralist account, then, 'genre' functions as a mobile field of differential relations within which generically marked traces enter into more or less stable, more or less temporary combinations according to a range of determinants both internal and external to the system itself. As a consequence, the critic's task, rather than attempting to fix an identity for the object called noir, would be to track the dispersals and condensations of noirishness within the generic system. At this point, then, Krutnik confronts the problem of noir not as one to be fixed by the application of a better theory, but one which addresses – as it should – fundamental questions to theories of genre in general.

Having established this very helpful framework for rethinking noir in relation to the generic system, Krutnik then goes on to produce his own delimited, substantive definition of noir to add to the critical roll-call. Whether this is the result of some fundamental need for closure which noir sets itching with particular force, or of academic publishing's demand for the new improved reading which is fit to tough it out in the interpretative market place, the result is another tight and centred account of the 'genre' which has a lot of intellectual energy tied up in policing its own constantly violated boundaries.

Krutnik's definition of noir 'pivots around the 1940s "tough" crime thriller' and the central theme of 'challenges to and problems within the ordering of masculine identity and male cultural authority'. As soon as the definition is offered, the labour of exclusion which is necessary to maintain it has to begin: a ruling out from this 'core of the 1940s noir phenomenon' of other generic areas where noirishness manifests itself – the gangster movie, the police procedural, the female-centred 'gothic suspense thrillers'. And as soon as exclusion begins, it also begins to be revoked, with a listing of characteristically

hybrid 1940s productions which mix the elements of the 'tough thriller' with those of the genres just expelled from the 'core'.

There is no doubt that Krutnik's carefully defined and contained approach is pertinent to central themes which surface constantly in the dispersed field of noir, nor that the readings it facilitates – of *The Dark Corner*, *Out of the Past*, *The Killers*, *Detour*, *The Woman in the Window* and others – are forceful and convincing. In reducing the field of noir to another static definable 'core', however, the book develops a certain monotony, with the individual readings resolving the films as a series of demonstrations of a single master-narrative. While the impossibility of masculinity is undoubtedly one of the things that noir stages, to make it noir's core problematic buys coherence at the cost of the exclusion of the diversity of its formal and thematic manifestations. As with some of the contributions to *Shades of Noir*, Krutnik's deployment of psychoanalytic theory compounds this tendency: theory works here to constitute a drastically restricted canon from those films on which it can clearly and convincingly operate, and the rest, regardless of their own manifestations of noirishness, are exiled to a capacious appendix.

As Cowie notes in her *Shades of Noir* contribution, not least amongst the consequences of Krutnik's argument is a repositioning of women in noir as the objects of the masculine drives and gaze, bound into that function by the structural necessities of this core male-centred problematic. The desire to concretize noir, to identify what it *is* and what it is *about* brings with it a reduction of the heterogeneity of noir to a strictly *gendered* core narrative structure.

As I implied earlier, Krutnik's methodological introduction indicates one potential route out of this particular phallogocentric fix, in its foreshadowing of a less anxiously retentive, metonymic drifting of the critical gaze across the inter-generic field. Another is hinted at by Krutnik's suggestive alternative term for the tough thriller – 'male melodrama' – which intimates a greater openness in the conventionally gendered coding of generic forms and themes, and suggests how a more permeable approach to genre might of necessity bring with it a more fluid account of the relation between gendered subject-positions and narrative options. It is a confirmation of noir's unsettling tendency to disarm its critics' totalizing ambitions that Krutnik's most valuable insights are to be found by reading against the grain, and in the margins, of his central thesis.